



## **Beautiful Fear** by **thelostatelier**

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**Summary:** Moving to Derry to stay with family, Vera was just trying to find her way after graduating from college. However, what was supposed to be an opportunity for her to get over her anxieties and figure out her future takes a dark turn when the town itself seems to change. Vera may be an adult, but fear is not something easily overcome, or gone unnoticed by a certain being. PennywiseXOC

# 1. Chapter 1

## Chapter 1

*Deep breaths. Everything's okay.*

Vera looked out the car window as her aunt and uncle drove them down to the supermarket, taking in the sights of the small old town passing them by in the dying light of early evening. It was a fairly picturesque town, Vera thought to herself, as words like 'quaint' and 'cozy' came to mind at the view of its aged buildings and architecture. Certainly nothing like the more populated, modern city she had travelled from down south. 'A change of pace,' her father had called Derry, while her mother had nodded in agreement. 'Start out somewhere small, get a feel for something simple, and then maybe you'll find what it is you're looking for.'

Having only just graduated from college, Vera was at a point in life where someone either seemed to have their entire future planned out until their death – career, family, retirement – or were simply leaves in the wind, being tossed about from place to place, job to job, in search of something that might bring them some fulfillment or hint as to the road ahead. Vera was one of the latter, having initially intended on going to school for history but settling on studies in literature and writing once she realized she wasn't very good at the former with all its numerous dates and political focuses. Reading and writing were things she had done in her pastime, and thus seemed like things she could continue to do with some skill and continued interest. If anything, she figured they could provide her with some sort of skill set for future work, though she had no idea what that would be. Her mind had always been focused on the present when at university, and now that she no longer had books to read and analyses to write, she was quite lost as to how to proceed forward, having never really considered what kind of career she wanted.

Which brought her back to the present moment, where she sat comfortably in the back of a car while aimlessly scanning street names and shop signs. In the driver and passenger seats, her uncle and aunt had been conversing amongst themselves about dinner and something about the garage roof needing repairs after a rain storm a

couple weeks ago. Vera hadn't really been listening until her aunt turned sideways in her seat to look back at her with an amicable expression, her curly gray perm appearing nearly brown in the shadows of the setting sun.

"Are you doing alright back there? Not too warm or anything?" the older woman asked, her pleasant smile never faltering as Vera gave her a quiet nod in response.

No doubt Vera's aunt had already heard about her increasing difficulties with anxiety from her parents earlier in the year and was doing her best to try and put Vera at ease. When Vera had first arrived at the couple's house the previous day, the two had been more than welcoming, asking Vera all about her trip and if there was anything they could get for her. To be perfectly honest, she felt like she was imposing on them more than anything, considering all they were doing for her.

"I'm glad you decided to come out here and stay with us for a bit; we don't usually get to see you very often except at the larger family gatherings," her aunt went on. When Vera gave no response, she continued. "It's hard getting out there after graduation; I actually did the same thing that you're doing now after I graduated. Setting out someplace new, just trying a number of different things to see what was out there; it's never easy and I know it can be scary sometimes, but you'll make it. Why, Derry was actually the first place I came to after I got out of school. I never expected to stay long, but here I am, over thirty years later, with a husband, a house, and a well-paying job. And I'm *happy*," she finished, emphasizing the last word as if to make a point. Vera nodded and threw a glance out the window as the street lights suddenly came on to illuminate the darkening town, coloring the store fronts and parked automobiles while making the shadows that crept up the buildings and within the alleyways all the more prominent.

"But you already knew what you wanted to do after graduating, didn't you, Aunt Belinda?" Vera asked, her eyes briefly tracing the lights down the street before resting on her aunt's. "You knew you wanted to work with selling home furnishings and all that, so you came out here where there was some current growth in the industry at the time, right? Mom said you had some help getting in – that's

how you got a job so quickly and now run your own store."

"Oh, she had help all right," Vera's uncle suddenly chimed in from the driver's seat, earning him a playful nudge from his wife. Belinda rolled her eyes.

"Yes, alright Richard, I'll admit there were some preconceived work plans being put together before I came here," she confessed with a smile in her voice and shifted in her seat to speak more comfortably with Vera. "Richard here was the son of the man who used to own the store I now run. They were looking for temporary help with some of the administrative work – dealing with clients and purchases and all that, but I seemed to really fit well with the business, so after a year or so Richard's father offered me a chance to stay on longer. The rest, as they say, is history."

"But then Uncle Richard's father gave the store to you after he died? Not his own son?" Vera asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, well, if it was under Richard's care, I think everyone – including his father – knew that it probably wouldn't last long. Richard's so disorganized sometimes it's a wonder he can even find a matching pair of socks," she teased, causing Vera to smile as her uncle grumbled something under his breath about getting no respect from anyone.

"Anyway," her aunt spoke continued, her voice taking on a more serious yet sympathetic tone, "as I said before: I know it's tough and you're nervous about... a lot, but things will work out in their own time. Mrs. Peterson is very nice and has already told me on multiple occasions that she is happy to have you come work with her at the library. And who knows, with your degree, and given a little bit of time, you might find that the library – and maybe even here in Derry – is where you'd ultimately like to be."

Vera smiled at her aunt's words and thanked her for her support, though her smile held a hint of sad uncertainty underneath. Coming to stay in an unfamiliar place with family she had never spent much time with and working a job that may prove to be a dead end presented Vera with all sorts of anxieties that caused her constant distress. Although the words of her parents – now backed by her aunt

and uncle – had offered assurance that Vera would be okay, she could never completely rid herself of the worry that always ate away at her insides, keeping her ever alert, ever fretting over the 'what ifs' and wondering how things would have been if she hadn't been so wrapped up in her anxieties. Yet here she was in Derry, starting a new job in the next couple days. She had come so far, and now there was no going back.

*Deep breaths. Everything's okay.*

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Several miles away, deep within the ground, an ancient being stirred from its long slumber.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter 2

By the time Vera and her relatives made it back to their house and had dinner, the moon was high in the sky and the town had gone quiet.

"Is it always this quiet here at night?" she asked her aunt as they cleaned and dried the dishes from dinner.

"You don't hear silence that often when you live in the city, huh?" her aunt smiled back in reply and Vera shook her head.

"There are always cars and people out late. It's almost unsettling how quiet it is here in contrast."

Aunt Belinda nodded her head as if in understanding. "Most schools haven't let out for the summer just yet; there'll be more people out and about then. Mind you, we aren't a large bustling metropolis, so any festivities or night-life we have here will probably seem small and toned-down compared to what you're used to. No worries though," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "we aren't so small and outdated that we don't know how to have fun when the opportunity arises."

"It just depends on what your definition of fun is, right?" Vera teased as she began drying one of the pots her aunt deposited on the drying rack.

The older woman gave her a calculated look and for a moment Vera worried if her indirect attempt at assuring her aunt that she would be fine came out as more of a sarcastic comment than one made in good humor. Since she was young, Vera had had trouble expressing herself and her thoughts sometimes, resulting in a number of painful and awkward conversation over the years. But the smirk that gradually crept its way onto her aunt's face allowed her to rest easy and let out a small sigh of relief.

"You can be just like your mother sometimes, Vera," she shook her

head. "Rose always had that sharp wit about her growing up, and although she was more prone to sharing that with people than you, I can tell you've got it in you as well."

Vera smiled. "It's one of the few things she says I inherited that wasn't from my father. Aside from my brains and work-ethic."

"Rose *did* always think about everything," Belinda stated more to herself than anyone in particular.

"Yeah, and that's why I always overthink things," Vera added with a slight frown as she bit her lip.

Aunt Belinda shut the water off in the sink and turned to look at her with a frown of her own, her brows slightly creased in concern. Taking her gloves off, she wiped her hands on the dry dish towel on the counter next to her before returning it to its place. "There's no such thing as overthinking, Vera," she said carefully and placed a hand on her niece's shoulder in a comforting gesture, rubbing it gently. "Some people just think about things more than others; that doesn't make it a bad thing. And the more you think, the more you will know and notice, and the more other people come to realize this, the more they will find what an incredibly intelligent and deeply wonderful person you are."

Vera was lost for words. In the short amount of time she had spent with her aunt, and as little as they knew each other, Belinda had spoken as if she had understood Vera all her life. Being sisters, she figured that her mother and the woman had spoken about her on many occasions, and while she had expected her aunt to anticipate her regular bouts of uncertainty and anxiety, Vera had never imagined she would respond in such a positive manner as if she were Belinda's own child. Not that Vera had thought poorly of her aunt, but most people didn't seem to fully grasp the concept of anxiety and what it could entail – or even be open to understanding it for that matter. Now, she felt nothing less than respect and admiration for the woman before her.

Placing the dish she had been drying on the counter beside her along with the dishcloth, Vera stepped forward and encircled her arms around her aunt.



"Thank you," she spoke earnestly, not sure how else to respond. The gesture felt somewhat awkward to her, seeing as she still wasn't especially close with the woman, but when her aunt brought her arms up to return the hug, Vera knew she understood – at least well enough.

*Deep breaths. Everything's okay.*

The next two days Vera spent organizing the corner guest room her aunt and uncle had set aside for her to stay in.

The room itself was painted a light sandy brown with two large windows against the wall opposite the door. Against the left wall stood an old wooden dresser of medium-height with a mirror hung above it. To the right of the doorway was a decent-sized closet where Vera could store her suitcases, and against the right wall rested a full-sized bed that matched the dresser, its mattress piled with off-white quilts and tasseled pillows. Although it was a bit of a tight fit, her uncle had also moved the old desk and chair from the sitting room to the right of her bed should she need to work on her own in private – something Vera was sure she wouldn't need, but appreciated the gesture anyway.

While the room had been cleaned and the bed prepared for her, both lacked any personal touches that would have distinguished the room as being inhabited by anyone, and Aunt Belinda had kindly offered to drive Vera into town to help her look for any decorations or furnishings to breath some life into the room. Vera had quickly accepted her offer, and by the end of the second day, the room looked much more inviting: light green flowered curtains bordered the windows and several posters of rural scenes and cityscapes decorated the walls. Along the top of the dresser Vera had placed various bought trinkets and objects she had brought from home – a purple stuffed dog that was her favorite growing up, a couple pictures of herself with her parents and friends from school, a small necklace given to her by her mother for graduation, a small blue glass bird – among other things, while the bedside desk held a couple books and a diary. Realistically speaking, it was probably the nicest her room was going to look before she got more settled in and allowed things to get cluttered.

Letting out a sigh, Vera allowed herself to flop down on her bed, spreading her arms and legs out like a starfish as she gazed at the golden orange glow of the setting sun as it cast its dying light against the wall opposite the windows. Tomorrow she would be going down to the library in the mid-morning to meet Mrs. Peterson, the head librarian, so as to learn more about the work she would be doing for the next several months.

The job description her uncle had passed on from the librarian was fairly vague but supposedly included a number of diverse tasks with steady pay. To be perfectly honest, she was quite surprised the librarian was willing to hire someone younger with little experience and whom she hadn't even met in person. If anything, it sounded like the woman was desperate for help, and Vera silently prayed that that didn't insinuate something negative or questionable about the job. As grateful as she was to her uncle for arranging the job opportunity for her, she would never be able to admit to anyone that it embarrassed her a fair amount. From Vera's perspective, it made her seem incapable of finding a job on her own. *But beggars can't be choosers*, she had managed to convince herself somewhat, reasoning that she was only taking the job temporarily until she either found something of greater interest to her or received some divine inspiration that made clear what she wanted to do with her life.

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Early that evening, in the warm summer air, a figure stood alone near one of the town parks, silently watching as a group of children played in the field across the street, a low rumbling sounding in its stomach as its gaze lingered over each of them. Four boys and one girl it counted, the oldest among them looking to be about eleven or twelve years old. All perfectly ripe for the picking.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter 3

The following morning Vera woke early to give herself time to eat a filling breakfast and prepare for her initial meeting with Mrs. Peterson.

She had laid out several outfits the night before and had settled on a teal button-down shirt and a pair of grey slacks to wear as she wasn't sure how she was supposed to dress and had been given no prior notice. In the city one could expect library staff to be more finely dressed, but in a small town there was a chance that the dress code wasn't as strict and refined. Vera decided that going for a nicer outfit on her first day would probably be safer and give a better first impression.

Aunt Belinda had offered to drive her to the library to ensure she got there on time, but Vera respectfully turned her down, knowing it wasn't a far walk and noting that she wanted to get a feel for the town. It was a warm sunny day anyway, and Vera felt like a quiet walk alone down the old streets would give her some brief respite from the busier past week. She had only decided to take the job two weeks ago and had been occupied working out the details of her trip and stay since then.

It was all short notice and happened faster than Vera would have liked, but staying busy had kept her from focusing too heavily on her worries for at least a little while. Her own thoughts and imagination became her greatest foes when she was left alone with them, and even as she enjoyed the fresh air and sunlight filtering through the trees around her as she headed for the library, there was an ever-present feeling of anxiety within her, threatening to cut through the pleasantness of the surrounding area and send a jolt of unease coursing through her.

*No, no, no, stop it, stop it, stop it!* Vera mentally scolded herself. *Just focus on the present for a little while; the future can wait. Don't make this bigger than it really is.*

Vera pinched the bridge of her nose and let out a sigh as if in disappointment that doing so didn't relieve her anxiety. She really didn't want to deal with any negative thoughts today when she was already busy thinking about her first day at a new job.

In the meantime, the trip to the town library was scenic and picturesque Vera noted as she walked, taking in the quaint houses, the large trees spreading towards the wide streets, and eventually the old buildings that managed to retain some of the character they were imbued with from earlier decades. If the librarian let her leave earlier enough, Vera figured she could spend some time walking around the town a little more – there were a couple small shops and a park space she had seen when out with her aunt earlier that she was interested in visiting – assuming it was still light enough outside.

The town wasn't big, but not being that familiar with the roads and locations yet, the last thing Vera wanted was to get lost somewhere out in the dark and have to ask around for directions like a tourist. It was okay to be a tourist in the big city because nearly everyone was one in some way, but in a place like Derry, Vera didn't want to stand out too much if she could help it. She wasn't much for attention and felt that her arrival was made known to more people than she probably realized.

Faster than she could believe – any maybe even liked – Vera stood before a two-story red-bricked building, noting the green sign in front that read "Derry Public Library." She glanced at her watch: only a few minutes early – the librarian probably wouldn't mind. Biting the inside of her lip, she navigated around the circle of purple flowers out front and climbed the small set of stairs leading up to the front doors. Letting out nothing more than a quiet breath, she pushed one open, not waiting to give herself time to think and therefore worry too much about what might happen once inside.

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Vera was met with silence as she entered into the library, a large semi-circular desk sitting empty before her. Behind the piece of furniture stretched a rather empty-looking hallway that Vera assumed led further into the library. To her immediate right and left stood a pair of closed oak doors, giving the space a rather closed-in feeling. Raising her eyebrows, Vera moved towards the desk, feeling like she

should tiptoe lest she disturb the heavy silence.

"Hello?" she called out hesitantly when she saw no signs of anyone around. All was quiet for another moment before a light swooshing sound could be heard against carpet somewhere in the distance.

Turning to look towards the space that lay beyond the desk, an older woman with short gray hair appeared from somewhere to the left and made her way up the hall, her hands busily dusting at the front of her long khaki skirt as if it were dirty.

"Oh, yes, hello," her voice came out old but warm. "You must be Vera; it's so nice to meet you. I'm Mary Peterson, the head librarian of the Derry Public Library," the woman greeted her and outstretched her hand.

"Yes, it's nice to meet you too, Mrs. Peterson. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here and help out," Vera managed to get out and firmly returned the handshake.

The old woman adjusted her spectacles and gave Vera a quick once-over as if to mentally assess what she could for the time being. "Delighted to hear so," she offered a quick smile and continued. "I usually have the help of a couple volunteers here but most are still in school right now, and I'm afraid the majority of the older adults have either moved on or passed away. It only seemed logical to hire someone else on who could help during the day or at times without having to balance schoolwork or health issues like Mrs. Poole – God bless her. As you can imagine, I was glad when I heard about you from your family, so that worked out quite well, I thought. Sometimes it's hard to find help around here, even when there are plenty of people," she explained at length.

*So much for librarians being strict old ladies who disapprove of noise,* Vera thought to herself and smiled inwardly. This one seemed like keeping quiet wasn't her strong-suit.

All Vera could get out was an "oh" before Mrs. Peterson turned and began walking back down the hallway from which she had emerged, leaving Vera to quickly move after her in the assumption that she was meant to follow the older woman. The action felt a little rude,

but Vera shrugged it off as a habit of the somewhat quirky librarian.

As they moved further into the library, Vera let her eyes wander across the dark teal and white wood-paneled walls with their old portraits and photographs, catching glimpses of what was likely the town and its inhabitants in earlier decades. Mrs. Peterson had switched roles to that of a tour guide, offering narrations and histories of the building and its founders and items as they traveled down the halls from room to room.

"Now the main floor here contains two reading rooms and most of the building's offices. There aren't many, but I like to keep one reserved as a break room and another for myself and the other staff as well. Oh, and I just want to point out that neither food nor drink are permitted anywhere in the library with the exception of the break room, but you're more than welcome to eat outside so long as you clean up after yourself. Bathrooms are located here on the first floor only, and we have small storage spaces on all three levels. Upstairs you'll find another larger reading room along with some smaller, more private ones we like to keep in case any visitors require a quieter space to work in. Both floors contain books that can be accessed by anyone, and I'll be sure to give you a more thorough tour after we've covered the basics – that way you can at least see where certain things are, where different books can be found, and the like."

She led Vera into a large room lined with bookshelves and occupied by rows of empty wooden tables and chairs. "As I noted before, anyone can access the books we have on either floor, but the older more invaluable ones are kept downstairs away from the public and must be retrieved by staff. The same goes for any records, newspapers, or the like. Down here..." she gestured with the raise of her arm and led Vera through a doorway and down a set of stairs towards a dimly lit space. There was a subtle drop in the temperature as they proceeded downwards, and Vera repressed a shiver as they reached the bottom.

"I realize it's not the most pleasant-looking space, but as you know, we can't have anything delicate exposed to too much lighting or heat should they deteriorate," Mrs. Peterson explained and ushered Vera to stay by her side. "As I said before, you'll find the majority of the more dated materials here; most are organized by aisle, shelf and

box, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find what you're looking for – assuming it's been filed back correctly," she added and gave Vera a look that promised her much regret if she ever dared misplace something.

Vera nodded in recognition of the librarian's nonverbal warning. The older woman was nice, but Vera figured misplacement and disorder were likely two of her pet peeves given her occupation.

As if reading her mind, Mrs. Peterson's look softened. "No, I won't fire you; no one's perfect when they start. But I highly recommend making some notes for yourself. If something goes missing, you're the one who's going to be looking for it first."

## 4. Chapter 4

### Chapter 4

For the next two hours Mrs. Peterson showed Vera the rest of the library down to the storage closet hidden away on the second floor. Layout-wise, the library was simple to navigate, but she knew it would take her some time to learn what materials the building housed and grow familiar with its databases and workings. In this way, Vera was glad the older woman took her time showing her how they did things.

Afterwards, Mrs. Peterson excused herself to attend to some work but not before encouraging Vera to have another look around and peruse the bookshelves. Having nothing better to do, and knowing she would have to regardless, Vera took Mrs. Peterson's advice and began her own tour of the library's books. It felt more comfortable browsing through the tall shelves of bound paper on her own, more personal. Running her fingers along various multicolored spines, Vera breathed in and smiled to herself. She may not have had any idea of what she wanted to do with her life, but walking amongst a sea of books in silent solitude certainly had its appeal.

Letting her eyes wander over the letters along the spines without really reading them, Vera hooked her finger at the top of a book and pulled it from the shelf, flipping it open to a random page and skimming through its contents – something about Scandinavian folklore. It was good to see that the library had some variety in its texts; in such a small town, a part of Vera had expected there to only be books on local history, agriculture, and the like.

"James!" A harsh whisper suddenly came out of nowhere to her left and Vera gasped.

Sucking in a breath as she nearly dropped her book, Vera made several clumsy attempts to regain some purchase on the thick volume before catching it at an awkward angle, half bent over with one foot bent off the ground and the book resting precariously between her torso and thigh. Letting out an audible sigh that was meant to help her compose herself, Vera turned her head to where the voice had



come from and was met with the sight of a girl staring back at her with wide eyes, her hands covering her mouth and nose in a manner that clearly suggested surprise and regret.

"Oh my gosh, I am so sorry," she spoke from behind her hands before lowering them. "I was just, um, I thought you were someone else."

"Yeah, I noticed that," Vera pointed out matter-of-factly with a nod of her head, and moved so as to adjust her grip on the book that was now starting to slide out from its place.

"I thought you were my cousin. We were going to meet up here, and since no one comes that often at this time of day..." the girl began explaining in a rush.

"No, it's fine," Vera assured her before she could continue and placed her book back into its proper place on the shelf. "I just didn't hear you and honestly wasn't expecting anyone else to be here either – especially during the summer." "Yeah, well, most *normal* people don't come here during the summer," the girl spoke with a roll of her eyes, "but older people do. Kids usually stay away 'cause they know better."

"Kids like you?" Vera inquired with the raise of an eyebrow, her tone lightly mocking.

"I'll have you know I take offense at that," the girl spoke with mock hurt, placing a hand to her chest as if she was wounded, and causing Vera to take note that she was a bit more developed than a younger girl would probably be. She had frizzy blonde hair tied back in a low ponytail that reached several inches past her shoulders, and stood near Vera's height at a little over five feet. A band of freckles across the bridge of her nose matched her light brown eyes and she reminded Vera of a mischievous child despite her notably mature features. If anything, her overly large jacket and brightly colored Keds held an air of fun-loving childishness to them. "As a full-grown respectable adult of twenty-one years, I'll have you know that I only occupy this space during the summer hours as it is my sworn duty to do so," she said quite proudly with gusto, tilting her head upwards and closing her eyes with her hand still pressed to her chest dramatically as if she were royalty addressing commoners.

"Which basically means she couldn't find a job anywhere else and this is the only place she could help out that made it sound like she was doing something productive with her time," a male voice suddenly sounded from behind the blonde and a young man who looked to be of similar age with short black hair poked his head out from the shelf to her right. His skin was fairer than the blonde's and his face narrower, but right away Vera could see a resemblance between them.

"James!" the blonde shot the young man a look and he let out an easy laugh as she proceeded to try and kick him in the shin despite smiling.

"This is Greta," he acknowledged with a nod of his head in the blonde's direction, "and as you can see, she fits in perfectly with a scholarly setting," he joked.

"Yeah, and this is my cousin, James," Greta piped in and sent an elbow towards the young man's ribs, "he's as smart as he is good-looking, which is to say 'not'."

Vera looked with amusement between the two as they seemed to be indecisive as to whether they should start bickering loudly or just deal subtle physical blows to one another.

"Um, it's nice to meet you both," Vera spoke out when it seemed like they were beginning to get carried away.

"Yeah, you too..." Greta trailed off.

"Vera," she offered.

"Vera." Greta repeated her name as if testing it on her tongue and gave her cousin a final shove that just left him laughing quietly at her side. "Are you new here?" she asked Vera with genuine interest as she seemed to settle down. "I only ask cause, you know, small town – not exactly a big destination on the map, everyone knows most everyone," she went on.

Vera nodded. "I just arrived not too long ago, but I don't know how long I'll be staying. I've got family out here and I've accepted a job at

the library for a little while."

"Ah," Greta nodded her head as if in understanding. "Summer job?"

"Not exactly," Vera corrected her. "I've only just graduated, so, more like for starters," she explained briefly, not really wanting to go into her whole story of indecision and gloom that led her to where she was.

"Oh, so you're the new hire, then," James spoke up from his cousin's side. "Greta told me the other day that the head librarian had mentioned something about bringing someone new in."

"Hey, we've all got to start somewhere, right?" Greta replied, not seeming bothered by the awkwardness Vera felt she was giving off in that moment. "I'm helping out here over the summer and James down at the grocer's while we're on break. I know it's not much, but at least it's something – and it sounds and is better than cleaning dishes at some hole-in-the-wall restaurant or lifting and shelving supplies," she shot a knowing look at James, "even if it doesn't pay."

James gave her a lazy shrug. "Hey, money is money."

"So then you're both in university? I didn't realize they had one out here in Derry," Vera admitted, making a mental note to look up on the surrounding area again later.

"Well, just outside Derry, really," James corrected her. "It's about an hour from here, so most outsiders don't know about it. Most of us who grew up here in Derry go there for college, but anyone who goes to the university from elsewhere doesn't come here since it's more out of the way and there isn't too much to do or see most of the time. If anyone does visit it's usually during a break or holiday."

"Makes sense," Vera replied nonchalantly. "I honestly don't know too much about this place since I haven't been here long."

"We'd be happy to show you around later if you'd like," Greta suddenly piped up, excitement clear on her face at Vera's words. "I mean, if you're not too busy, that is. Do you start work today? I suppose we should have asked before starting this conversation; don't

want to waste your time and get you in trouble if you're only just starting" She mumbled the last bit more to herself with a somewhat bothered look coming over her features.

"No, no, no, it's fine," Vera stepped forward with a wave of her hand in an attempt to reassure the two that they hadn't done anything wrong. "Mrs. Peterson was just showing me around the library today. I don't actually start until tomorrow morning, so if you guys are okay with it..." she let the end of the sentence trail off, hoping she wouldn't be imposing.

In a flash the blonde's smile returned and she took hold of Vera's wrist, almost swinging her arm back and forth. "That's great! Do you want to meet up for lunch in, say, an hour? James and I have a couple errands to run and I'm sure you'd rather change into something a little less formal, more comfortable – unless you're okay in what you've got on. I don't know what you like, so don't mind me," she stumbled over the last part realizing she might have unconsciously offended Vera. "There's a nice diner around the corner from here named 'Harvey's' with great burgers and killer sundaes –," she quickly offered to cover her potential blunder, looking hopeful, "really cheap but the best in town."

"Sounds good," Vera smiled at her and then James.

Greta's feelings were almost contagious, Vera was realizing. She was friendly and warm with an endearing sort of quirkiness to her that made one want to talk and get along with her. Vera would have liked to say the same of herself, momentarily envying the young girl for her natural charm and wishing she could be as outgoing and at ease with herself.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Chapter 5

Vera stood outside of a small building made from white-painted brick, a red neon sign barely illuminating the name "Harvey's" in casual cursive writing in the afternoon sunlight. Greta and James had said they would meet Vera out front, but seeing as they had had some errands to run beforehand, she figured it wouldn't hurt to take her time getting there.

Absentmindedly she played with the hem of her shirt as though it didn't fit properly; she had spent several minutes back home trying to decide what to wear before settling on a pair of jean shorts and light purple top. Had someone been watching her, they would have thought she'd never been out with other people before. Vera didn't care though. Her shyness always won out in situations like this that involved new people, and to be honest she would rather start out seeming a little more reserved – if not plain – before relaxing and fully opening up to someone she didn't know that well.

"Vera!" the sound of Greta's voice pulled her from her aimless thoughts and she turned to see the blonde and her cousin coming across the road towards her, Greta waving her arm animatedly while James preferred a less conspicuous display by giving her a warm smile.

Vera smiled back at the two and gave a small wave. "Hey, thanks again for doing this, guys. I know you probably had other plans for the day," she expressed her gratitude as they approached.

"Not at all. Sorry for keeping you waiting," Greta replied in return.

"Shall we?" James offered and pulled on the diner's door, holding it open for his cousin and Vera as they entered the small building.

The inside was cozy and charming, with red walls and a black and white tiled floor that matched the red leather booths and tables that littered the inside. Opposite the entrance a bar counter stretched around the back wall and memorabilia from the 1950s were scattered

and hung around the space.

*Very 1950s indeed*, Vera thought to herself with a smile as they took their seats in a booth, taking comfort in the old-fashioned quaintness of the diner and its atmosphere. The three of them ordered a round of soft drinks when a waitress in matching 50's attire with curly brown hair came by, and Vera settled on – at the behest of Greta – a double bacon cheeseburger with fries that was probably as good as it was artery-clogging.

"So," Greta shoved a couple fries in her mouth, "where are you from, Vera? Most people who come here aren't really from anywhere. As I said before, Derry isn't on the map because of some big invention or famous person, so it's unusual for someone..." she paused, fishing for the right word, "'younger'... to come here to work? I don't know. Most people who live here are born, raised, and die here."

"Yeah, I kind of figured as much," Vera nodded and took a bite from her burger. "I'm from down south, in Georgia; grew up a city girl. But maybe I had too much of the city life, and that's why I'm here," she shrugged as if unsure of the answer. *Liar*, a voice in her head shot back at her. *You were indecisive, hesitant, and that cost you. That's why you're stuck here on a 'plan B' trip organized by your parents, trying to push off your anxiety of getting a real start somewhere.*

"Shut up, Vera," she mumbled to herself in annoyance, hiding her words behind the burger held to her lips. "And what about you guys?" she inquired after taking a large bite. "Derry-born and raised?"

"I am, but Greta's from the next county over – though that might as well be the same place," James informed her with a nod in his cousin's direction while taking a large bite of his own burger.

"Yep, good old middle-of-nowhere Maine," Greta stated with fake enthusiasm before taking a big swig of her drink. "If you're still out here by the time you', then it's either because your life's been decided for you, or you can't afford to leave."

"Oh, come on, Greta," James said with a disappointed look aimed at his cousin. "It's not that bad."

"Speak for yourself," the blonde turned on him. "It'd be easier for you to leave this place with your sports than me with general education." She turned to Vera. "Obviously there's no career in sports around here unless you want to be a gym teacher, so James can get himself drafted onto some professional baseball team in the big city. I'm more likely to be stuck here in Derry since my mom's a teacher and they're always in need of those around here." She shook her head and sighed to herself. "Should have gone away with Dad after the divorce."

"Yeah, yeah, you know you'd be bored without me," James pointed to her with a fry before tossing it in his mouth.

Greta smirked and rolled her eyes. "Oh, sure, because there's *obviously* no one else in the world outside of this town."

Vera smiled at the cousins' playful banter. "It's good that you guys know what you want to do, though," she told both of them in earnest. "I started out studying history but changed my focus to literature, which threw off my studies a bit. For a short time I was afraid I was going to have to double down on classes so I could catch up and graduate within four or five years."

"That's what happened to one of my friends," James nodded. "Where he began was so different from where he ended up wanting to be that he basically had to start over again in his third year. Said it was kind of embarrassing being in the intro class and feeling like he was so much older than everyone else," his tone conveyed sympathy.

"I was lucky," Vera agreed, "that history and literature have a number of similarities in terms of study and practice. If I had to start over from scratch that late into university I think I'd feel more overwhelmed than anything." Fiddling with her straw wrapper on the table, Vera began to roll up the thin piece of paper into a small, tightly-wound tube. "I have a hard time –" Her words were cut short as there came a loud noise from behind them.

The three turned their attentions towards the source of the sound as a pale, distraught-looking woman with a black bob stood in the doorway, her expression appearing somewhat distant as her eyes briefly scanned the interior of the diner before she made her way towards the back counter.

Vera watched the woman with her companions, taking note of how she seemed on edge despite the confidence in her step, as signaled by the way she kept clenching and unclenching her fists in her skirt, kneading the dark fabric between her fingers as though to rid her hands of some unseen contaminant.

When he waitress from earlier appeared from the kitchen, the woman approached the counter, her hands finding purchase on its lip like a life raft in the sea. Frantic but incoherent words were spoken between the two women and Vera could see the waitress's brow furrow in concern after a few moments. She shook her head a couple times and turned to leave when the dark-haired woman reached out and grabbed her wrist tightly, halting the brunette's movements.

"Please," a hushed, broken voice crept passed the woman's lips, loud enough for all to hear, and Vera noticed the pained look on her face as she suddenly surveyed the space around her, as if afraid her voice had drawn attention. It was an unnecessary reaction, as her appearance had already drawn all eyes to her from the moment she stepped inside.

The waitress made a gentle effort to place a hand softly over the one that encircled her wrist like a vice, and spoke a few words that made the woman's tense figure ease somewhat and her hand drop from the blonde's. When she moved away, Vera was able to make out a strange mixture of annoyance and deep thought on the waitress' face. She disappeared into the kitchen for a minute or two, leaving the nervous woman to wring her hands together, glancing about with a distant look on her face once more – though now with a crinkle of worry on her brow.

A minute later the waitress came back out again and began making her rounds at each table of customers, finally arriving at that occupied by Vera and her new friends. All three gave the young woman a quizzical look as she approached, expecting an explanation for what was going on.

"Hey, sorry to bother you guys," the waitress seemed somewhat hesitant, "have any of you seen Thomas Brown in the past day or two?"



"We know him, but haven't seen him," Greta replied.

"Who's Thomas Brown?" Vera looked between the cousins for an answer.

"Greta used to babysit him when he was smaller – he was a good kid," James supplied her with.

"Medium height, sandy brown hair, about twelve, often wears a sports jersey," the waitress listed off, "he goes to school with my son."

Vera shook her head, indicating she had seen no one that fit the description.

"Did something happen to him?" Greta asked the waitress as the woman turned to go back towards what Vera now knew to be the boy's mother.

"Don't know," the waitress spoke honestly with a shrug. "Susan said he didn't come home last night. Supposedly he was out playing football with some of his friends before it got dark and they all went home. No one's seen him since then, apparently."

Vera spared a glance behind the waitress towards the worried mother whose eyes were now focused on the foursome. "We'll tell you or get a message through to her if we see him," she offered, earning nods from her companions across the table.

"Thanks," the waitress replied – though her words sounded half-hearted – and she spun on her heels to return to the woman at the counter.

"You don't think he's just playing around, do you?" James asked no one in particular, bringing Vera's attention back to the table. "I mean, he's run away in the past, hasn't he?" The second question was directed towards Greta.

Greta shook her head. "He did a couple times when he was younger, but that was just when he was mad. He did it one time when I was babysitting because I wouldn't let him have any dessert since he didn't finish his dinner."

"So you think something might have happened to him?" James asked, looking more concerned as he continued to tap a french-fry on his plate – the same he had been unconsciously tapping for the past several minutes since Thomas' mother came into the diner. Greta's brows were drawn together as she seemed to be deeply concentrating on the food before her, biting her lower lip.

"Are you sure he isn't just, you know, hiding out somewhere? That he didn't just stay near the park or someplace because he was upset about something?" Vera questioned her.

Greta's eyes met hers and she shook her head firmly. "He couldn't. Even if he wanted to and did, there's no way he could do so unseen or without anyone finding out by the morning."

"Why is that?" Vera reflected the same serious expression as James when Greta answered her.

"Because Thomas is afraid of the dark."

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter 6

The remnants of the child's body jerked roughly as the creature pulled out a chunk of meat from its small throat with a pair of carnivorous jaws, a thick ripping sound followed by the crunch of neck bones breaking echoing through the sewers. Barely chewing the flesh, the creature swallowed down the chunk of meat quickly, licking its lips to lap up some of the shredded skin that hung loosely from its mouth, not bothering with the mixture of saliva and blood that had dribbled down its lips and chin in the process.

The child had been dead for close to an hour now, but the creature could still taste the fear that had rolled off his small, defenseless form with each delicious bite.

Thomas walked down the town sidewalk, tossing his football up with a spin at face-level before easily catching it and repeating the motion. He had been out most of the afternoon with his friends in the park and was looking forward to going home and having a good meal before it got too dark; he was never one to stay out late.

There was a light rustling as the wind passed through the trees lining the road, a bright orange-pink coating the buildings as the sun descended further towards the horizon. Most of the streets were emptying out as the town's residents began to head home from their jobs for the evening, a stray figure here and there serving to keep the area from appearing completely deserted.

Only a couple more blocks and Thomas would reach his neighborhood.

"Psst." The sound cut through the gentle breeze as he rounded a corner, causing the boy to stop in his tracks. He stopped tossing his ball and glanced around him, trying to discern if he had actually heard the sound or just imagined it. It could have been the wind.

"Psst. Thomas," a voice whispered his name and Thomas frowned, his gaze coming to rest on a figure peering around a building a little ways ahead of him. Almost instantly, the figure ducked behind the brick wall and out of sight, much like a child wishing to remain hidden in a game.

Squinting and jutting his head forward ever so slightly, Thomas took a couple steps forward. "Mom?" he called out.

As if on cue his mother poked her head around the corner, a smile like that of a mischievous child etched on her face. "Thomas, over here," she beckoned with a small wave of her hand.

Thomas returned her smile in slight confusion. "Mom, what is it? What are you doing out here?"

Just as he reached her she ducked behind the corner and into the alleyway between the buildings. A couple more steps and Thomas stood where she had been moments before. He took in the darkened alley she had disappeared down, but saw nothing. "Mom?" his voice sounded a little weaker as he stayed on the spot and looked around with uncertainty, the whole situation seeming quite odd.

A side door on the building on the left opened and he saw his mother peek out again. "Come on, slowpoke, in here. I've got something to show you," she gestured for him to come after her and disappeared inside, leaving the door slightly ajar for him to follow.

Now cradling his ball in his arms, Thomas jogged a few steps forward, pausing once he reached the old door. Taking hold of the doorknob, he pulled the door open a little farther and paused, looking into the dim space beyond. There didn't appear to be any lights inside, and he couldn't see anything beyond a foot or so.

At his apparent hesitation, his mother's voice beckoned to him from somewhere inside. "It's okay, honey. I'm here. Can you see me?"

Thomas squinted a little, trying to see without stepping into the room. "I don't –" His voice turned to a scream as two hands reached out and suddenly pulled him into the awaiting darkness. On reflex Thomas jerked his arms around himself defensively, his ball falling somewhere to the floor and the door slammed shut with a loud bang behind him.

As soon as the hands had grabbed him they were gone, and Thomas was alone in the blackness, his breath coming out short and fast. "Mom!" his panicked voice cried out into the unknown space, willing his mother's presence to remedy his growing fear of the current situation. But his call was met with silence.

Trying to ease his pounding heart, Thomas raised his arms out before him for balance and slowly moved in a circle in place. There was no light anywhere, not even from the door he had passed – or rather been forced – through. "Mom! Where are you?" he called out again, desperation creeping into his voice. Again, he received no reply.

His eyes starting to prickle with tears, Thomas felt as though his heart would burst from his chest as he attempted to take a few small steps forward, hoping to run into a wall or something he could use to get out of the space and somewhere illuminated. After a moment of blind groping, his hand came into contact with a smooth wall. Or at least what Thomas thought was a wall until it moved out from under his fingertips with a low rumbling like that of a thunderstorm.

Startled, Thomas flung himself away, tripping over his feet and wincing as his back hit the ground roughly. Despite his natural urge to rub the pained areas, he held himself perfectly still, too scared to move and straining his ears for any sound of movement. The rumbling had stopped, but it had been replaced by the faint sound of solid steps, one slowly thudding after another.

"H-hello?" Thomas' voice came out weakly and he sniffed, wiping his nose. "Is s-someone there?" There was no response, but the footsteps seemed to be getting louder with each passing second, until they were perhaps just beyond the room. They stopped,

and there was a sort of light scratching-fumbling sound that echoed in the room around him.

"Hello?" the words passed the boy's lips as nothing more than a whisper, and suddenly the sounds intensified, the scratching becoming violent much like a cat attempting to get at a mouse within a box.

Letting out a strangled cry, Thomas pushed himself up on his arms and scrambled backwards, trying to get away from the terrible noises. "Go away!" he cried, tears spilling down his cheeks as his back pressed up against what he knew this time to be a wall. "Go away! Go away! Go away!"

A couple more seconds and the scratching suddenly stopped. A moment of silence passed and then there was a click like the sound of a latch, followed by a steady creaking from somewhere opposite Thomas.

Thomas lifted a shaking hand to his mouth in an effort to hide his crying, his breathing unsteady and wet from the snot dripping down his throat.

The creaking ceased. Thomas' breath caught in his throat. The footsteps came thudding like iron this time, approaching Thomas with quick subsequent steps faster than humanly possible.

"Mom!" Thomas wailed, and from all around a multitude of fingers crawled and curled over his skin as hands latched onto him, slimy extremities tugging at his clothes and ripping at his hair and skin, hungry for contact.

Thomas managed to let out another shriek, and the hands fully engulfed him within the endless darkness.

The creature smiled and shivered with pleasure, recalling the sweet screams of the child. It didn't need his physical body for sustenance, but sometimes, depending on its cravings, eating the flesh and insides that were still seasoned by fear and distress provided a feeling of satisfaction. Swallowing down another bite, this time from the child's

chest, a deep purr-like sound rumbled from the creature's throat.

So long... It had been so long since its last meal, and it was eager to have more.

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"Because Thomas is afraid of the dark," Greta informed Vera. She lowered her voice and leaned forward in her seat.

"I've never talked with anyone about it before since it was never really my business to do so – it just doesn't feel appropriate. He had a bad experience when he was little, when he and his parents were out of town on vacation. They were at some family fair out on a farm, and at one point he got separated from them – in a cornfield maze of all places. By the time his parents had alerted someone to what had happened, and they got several groups to help find him, it was dark. His mom told me it took two hours to find him, but other than being scared and a little disheveled, he seemed pretty okay. He was fine the next day, but she said when it got dark that night, he got really anxious and panicked, wanting to keep all the lights on when they went to bed and even becoming distressed when they had to drive in the dark."

She shook her head sadly. "He got a little better over time, but he still experienced a lot of anxiety when the sun went down. That was probably the hardest thing I had to deal with when I would babysit him late into the night. Of course it didn't help that his mom was super freaked out after losing him that night, and she's been really anxious about stuff like that even since. If she couldn't find him for a couple hours, she's probably at her wits end if it's been half a day."

"I guess being alone in the dark for an extended time caused some sort of trauma for him and her both," Vera observed, feeling bad that both parent and child had been affected.

"Makes sense," James agreed. "I found a snake in my shoe once – almost bit me if I hadn't seen it at the last moment when I tilted my shoe to put it on. I was afraid of empty spaces for fear there might be a snake in them for the next year at least," he mentioned to Vera.

"Still are, too," Greta teased, still somewhat serious and eliciting a

light blush from James.

"I'd like to see you not be," he mumbled back and finally ate the fry he had been fiddling with.

"I'm sure he'll turn up alright," Vera tried to assure Greta, or at least change the atmosphere. She was already worried about enough as it was. Thinking about someone disappearing – and a child at that – was more than she wanted to deal with when she hadn't even been in town more than a week. *Stop making everything about you, Vera*, a voice in her head chided. *A kid is missing and might be hurt, and you're here worrying about yourself*. Vera clenched her jaw subconsciously, frustrated with herself.

"We can watch out for him," Thomas added on for good measure and Vera nodded.

"He'll be okay." She only wished she could say that with absolute certainty.



## 7. Chapter 7

### Chapter 7

By the time Vera left the diner with Greta and James to tour the town, the atmosphere had lightened considerably thanks – largely – to James, who had tried to flirt with a young woman he bumped into on the way to the bathroom. The attempt was mediocre at best, but the laughter that followed was just what the group needed to lift the serious mood that had settled over them as they finished their food.

"So what do you guys like to do in your free time around here?" Vera asked as they casually strolled down the sidewalk of Derry's main street. "I know you said there wasn't too much people come here for, so do you go somewhere out of town or does Derry have anything special during the summer?"

"Eh, not really," answered James on her left. "It's only Derry, so everyone usually just hangs out with friends and family around here."

"But there are some things we have that you can do. There's a reservoir not far outside town, and lots of places outdoors you can walk around if you like that kind of thing," Greta was quick to point out. "Of course, we don't have some giant mall or anything," she noted disappointedly, "but there are a lot of shops and places to browse around here in town. And there's always the movie theater if you're really bored." She said the last statement with a jerk of her thumb back towards the way they'd come.

"We've also got a couple summer fairs at the start and end of the season, right around when everyone gets out of school and around the time we go back," James added and Greta nodded. "Those are pretty fun, and Greta and I usually go with a couple friends from school. The first one starts at the end of next week if you're interested."

"Doesn't sound too bad – as opposed to sitting around indoors all day," Vera smiled lightly and tilted her head back as if considering it.

"You could come with us – that is, if you don't mind our company."

Maybe like a sort of 'welcome to Derry' party or something," James invited her.

"Only if you don't mind mine," was Vera's response. "I don't want you guys to go out of your way for me if it troubles you or if I'm boring you. If I'm some kind of third wheel just tell me."

James and Greta turned and frowned at Vera in synch.

"Don't say that," Greta said, sounding hurt. "If I hang out with someone it's because I want to, not because of some obligation."

"No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that as an insult or anything," Vera quickly started, taken aback by how earnest Greta's reaction was. "It's just that sometimes... I feel like people would only do things or include me because they had to, you know?" She looked down sheepishly. "It's awkward when you're with people and you know that they know that you don't really fit in with the group; just makes it uncomfortable for everyone." *I know we just met, but don't feel it means you have to stick around just because you're the first people who have truly met me and I don't know anyone else yet.* Vera wanted to say the words out loud, but kept the thought to herself for fear it might be taken as a further insult.

Greta looked hard at her for a minute, opened her mouth to say something, seemed to think better of it, and closed it, instead turning her head back to face front.

"We wouldn't do that to you," James stepped in where his cousin fell silent. "Not me, and especially not Greta," he said earnestly with conviction. His eyes briefly left Vera to glance at the blond beside him as if to gauge her response, and Vera knew there was something there, unspoken, that had happened with the young girl in the past.

Maybe she would ask James about it sometime if they had a moment alone, but she currently felt it was much too soon to discuss personal matters with them. Those were things you didn't usually talk about until you knew someone really well, and certainly for longer than a day – a few weeks at the very least. "I know," she agreed and smiled apologetically at them, knowing that the mood was quickly going south again. "I'm sorry, I'm just being ridiculous. I'm glad you guys

ran into me because I honestly don't know very many people here, so I feel a bit out of place right now." That was the truth. "But I'd love to have some company if you're both going to the fair; it's more fun to do those sorts of things when you're with friends than by yourself."

"Damn straight," Greta mumbled quietly from beside Vera, who noticed that the other girl seemed to be coming back out of her brief unhappy mood, though she still bore the semblance of a frown on her brow.

"I second that," James agreed, trying to help lighten the mood once more which Vera noticed he seemed fairly good at – if not accustomed to. "We don't have to plan everything out just yet since we've still got some time, and I'm sure we'll be seeing each other more often since we know you'll be at the library like Greta. Just leave next Friday evening open and we'll go from there."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," Vera smiled. "It's not like there's that much else I'm planning to do around here; it is Derry, after all."

"Touché," James returned her smile with a look of approval. "So where to next?" he asked then as the group came to a halt at an intersection where the town's buildings became intermixed with small old apartments and residences. "More aimless wandering, or do you have a preference?"

The question was directed more towards Vera, but she still turned to look at Greta to see if the younger woman had any input. The shrug and blank look she got in return suggested none, and she paused a moment in thought before recalling "I thought I saw a park a few days ago, somewhere nearby. If that's not too far, I was thinking it might be worth a visit, if not just to relax a little since it's a nice day outside."

"Bassey Park?" James assumed.

"That's not a bad idea," Greta spoke up and gave James a nod. "It's a little ways back the way we came and where they usually set up the fair," she explained to Vera. "It's right at the town center and has a nice green space with a canal that's always good for a walk-through or picnic."

"Probably a good idea to see it at least once, then, so I know where I'm going next week," Vera reasoned out loud. "Besides, I don't need to see everything in one day. I'm sure I'll have plenty of time later to see more of the sites outside of town."

"You actually *could* see the whole town and its surrounding area in one day if you wanted to," Greta informed her, "but we should probably save some of the excitement for later," she agreed, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "Heaven forbid we show you everything now and Derry returns to its normal, uneventful self."

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Although it had been Vera's intention to see more of Derry that afternoon, the trio didn't make it out of the park until the sun was receding behind the buildings and treetops.

Together the three had toured the perimeter of the park before entering deeper into its grasses, Greta and Thomas each taking turns pointing out the sights and recalling some amusing story or odd rumor about them. There was the Paul Bunyan statue at the front of the park that Vera found to be a bit of an eyesore – if not tacky; the local high school where all the hallways smelled of toilet water and sweat – according to Greta; the canal which divided the park in two for the most part, with one side appearing more upkept and used than the other; and finally the red "kissing bridge" that served to connect both sides of the park, so named for the multitude of lovers' names and initials carved into the wooden structure throughout the years.

Aside from these notable elements, the park was generally as cozy and as "normal" as any park could be. Most of the space was unoccupied in the warm afternoon sun, the only exception being the occasional dog-walker or persons who looked as though they might be involved in organizing the upcoming fair. The green space gave off a feeling of calm, and paired with the early summer weather, it wasn't long before the three young adults had settled down on a spot in the grass and just talked – Vera about life in the city and the university she had attended, and Greta and James about growing up around Derry, the current gossip of the town, and their own studies.

Overall, it was a pleasant way to pass the time and Vera could have

easily listed it as one of the most enjoyable days she had had in the past month. As such, it came as a surprise when she finally noticed that the sun was setting, alerting her to the fact that they had been in the park for several hours and that she should begin heading back to her aunt and uncle's house before it got too late.

Promising to make plans for the fair the following week, and with a tight hug from Greta, the three said their goodbyes for the evening and went their separate ways. Walking home, Vera couldn't keep the smile from her face as she thought about her day, sending a quiet thank you to the heavens and praying that the ones to follow would be just as good.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Chapter 8

The following week passed uneventfully much to Vera's relief. Mrs. Peterson gave her a duplicate set of keys to the library to help her access certain rooms and files in case it was necessary, and the majority of her time was occupied shelving books, making copies of information pamphlets for the summer library reading programs, and organizing files in the back office.

Greta had come in twice as part of her scheduled volunteer work, and both young women had spent their lunch hours together outside, taking a break from the quiet stillness within the library to get some fresh air and sunlight outside. James even came over one time to bring them donuts on their lunch break – a gesture Vera appreciated but also regretted as she was sure the several donuts she ate in addition to her own lunch would give her stomach problems for the rest of her shift.

Overall, things were going rather smoothly, giving Vera a sense of assurance that she would settle nicely into her new place in Derry.

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Vera squinted at the cloud-covered sky as she closed the library door behind her with a firm clunk. It had been windy and cloudy all day, the dark skies and rumbling that echoed from above her threatening to send down rain and lightning since the early hours of the morning. The rain that started around noon hadn't let up since, and continued to show no signs of stopping any time soon.

With a sigh Vera opened the umbrella she had brought to work in case of such an event, and holding her bag close to her chest, began heading in the direction of the store where James had started working, having agreed with him and Greta earlier in the week to meet them there to discuss their plans for the fair starting in the next few days.

*Of all the days it could have rained, it had to be today...* Vera thought with annoyance as she attempted to avoid the larger puddles in the

sidewalk without wandering onto the road or into the muddy grass. She had only been walking a couple minutes and already she could feel and hear the rainwater squelching in her shoes, her hair blowing about her face and rain dampening the edges of her clothes when a strong gust of wind came. *James and Greta share a car*, her inner voice reminded her. *Maybe they could give me a lift back afterwards, so I don't have to walk all the way back in the rain.*

But having the cousins drive her everywhere in bad weather seemed a bit inconvenient for them. Borrowing one of her aunt and uncle's cars on bad weather days might be worth considering in the future, Vera thought to herself. That is, if they were willing and able. For now, she would just have to avoid the big puddles and hope the wind wouldn't ruin her umbrella. At least she didn't have to walk too far to James' work; this was one occasion where she was happy Derry wasn't big.

Vera was nearly halfway to her destination when it happened: she was walking along the main road in the hopes that some of the trees and larger building would block some of the wind and rain for her. As she was about to cross one of the larger streets, she turned to look down the bridged road for any traffic, as the heavy rain pelting the surroundings made it nearly impossible to hear anything else. The action was performed too late – or perhaps just in time – because as soon as she looked across the bridge, she witnessed a small form in bright blue go over the railing with a brief but audible screech.

Vera's mouth opened silently to form an 'O' and her eyes grew wide, her feet sending her in the direction of the bridge before her bag and umbrella even hit the ground.

In an instant she reached the thick wooden-lined structure, bracing her hands against the warm, wet railing to keep herself from tumbling over it as her head and shoulders extended out to look down into the flooded stream below. Her eyes blinked rapidly through the rain, darting to-and-fro over the churning waters when through the storm she saw a flash of blue coat and caught sight of the small hand of a child reaching up and out of the water before being swept under.

"Oh my god!" the words left her lips in a rush and without thinking

she flung herself atop the railing and pushed herself off towards the running waters below.

For a moment she was totally submerged within the cool stream's current as it pulled her along, but then her head breached the surface, and she quickly turned her face in the direction of the current, looking ahead as the water carried her away with it.

Blinking the rainwater from her eyes again, Vera was able to catch glimpses of the blue coat farther downstream, and began kicking her legs, her arms trying to work through the water in an effort to push her forward faster.

Gradually she closed the distance between them, the current aiding her but the turbulence of the flooded waters beating against her as though trying to stall her efforts. At several points she felt something hard knock against her legs— large rocks, most likely – but with adrenaline running through her she paid them no mind, focusing solely on reaching the small figure now coming closer.

Struggling, Vera extended her right arm towards the jacket, her legs working harder to give her the boost she needed to close the gap. She grabbed for whatever purchase she could get on the clothing, missed, tried again, missed again, but on the third try, managed to grab a handful of it. At first she feared the jacket and its owner had separated, but when she felt a greater weight of resistance when trying to tug the clothing back towards her body, she knew the child was still there. The realization saw her almost let out a sigh of relief, but the water that nearly flooded her mouth prompted her to instantly shut it and tilt her face higher.

Mustering up her strength, she pulled the child's now motionless body towards her and frantically moved to position its head above the water, desperately hoping it wasn't too late. With no time to waste, she forced herself to begin swimming towards the closest bank of the stream, trying to keep both her head and the child's from submerging while now fighting against the push and pull of the current.

After several desperate attempts and straining herself to work harder, Vera felt her feet hit the ground. Sticking her free hand lower



beneath the water in front of her, she felt a mixture of rocks, grass, and dirt beneath her fingertips, and knew they were close to making it out. Digging her fingers into the wet earth and pulling, while bending her knees to push off against the ground, Vera managed to bring them closer to bank, repeating the motion until at last they emerged fully from the stream. With one last pull and a groan, Vera succeeded in heaving the child's body onto the bank next to her and allowed her body to fall back onto the ground. From head to toe she was shaking from the exertion and adrenaline that still rushed through her veins, and her chest rose and fell heavily as she panted.

*God, that was so stupid. What was I thinking?!* she scolded herself harshly and eyed the child wearily.

A little girl's face framed by dark wavy hair poked out from the hood of the jacket, small beads of water cascading down her small form. For a tense few moments she didn't move, until a burst of water erupted from her lips that sent the child into a fit of harsh coughs and convulsions.

*Thank goodness,* Vera let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding and closed her eyes, listening to the girl's coughs. She was alive.

Vera became more aware of her own body shaking and every inch of her suddenly felt exhausted as though she had just run a marathon. She had to get help.

The little girl's skin was a sickly pale color despite her breathing again, and she still appeared unconscious. Vera didn't know the condition of the little girl, and feared she might be seriously hurt. What if her survival depended on how fast Vera could get her help? She felt the trembling of her own body might now be due to the panic beginning to seize her.

Panicking, Vera tried to push herself up off the ground, only to pathetically slip back down as her body refused to comply. She let out a shaky breath. She couldn't move; she was still in shock. She needed to take a deep breath and calm herself so she could focus. Then, maybe...

The thought went unfinished as Vera blacked out.

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The creature removed itself from the water and slid onto the land with ease, moving towards the small form of the child it had lured to the bridge's edge and pulled in. Red clown hair spilling down its face in rivulets and clothes dripping wet, it approached her slowly, creeping on all fours like a predator stalking its prey.

Her eyes were closed but it could hear her breath coming out with a gargle – not waterlogged, but still wet. Leaning down towards her paled face, it gave a few sniffs, satisfied that it could still clearly smell the fear on her.

Confident that the child wouldn't regain consciousness any time soon, it turned its attention to the other figure lying beside the child. A deep growl rumbled in its throat, anger and annoyance spiking at the one who had attempted to keep it from its meal. Like the child the older female's eyes were closed and she appeared unconscious, though her breathing wasn't as labored. But it could smell the fear coming off her – a surprising amount considering she hadn't been the target of its terror and affliction.

Ignoring the child for a moment, the creature stalked over to the young woman's side, its golden eyes resting on her form for a moment, deliberating. Two meals at the effort of ensnaring one. She was a little older than most of its victims, but fear was fear, and food was food.

The creature drew its painted lips back into a snarl. She had tried to come between it and its food; she deserved this, like the rest of the lowly animals who stood in its way. In one smooth movement its hand reached out and curled around her throat, gripping her tightly. It wanted to choke her into consciousness, see the fear in her mind etch itself permanently upon her face before the light left her eyes.

But her fear wasn't due to *it*.

The grip around her throat loosened until its hand was merely resting against her skin. She hadn't been afraid because of *it*. The creature felt a sense of dissatisfaction bubbling up inside and leaned in closer,

ready to delve into her mind and unlock her most terrible memories and fears.

There came a sudden loud bang from somewhere above, past the bank and above the steep slope that led towards the road.

The creature jerked its head upwards in the direction of the sound, and the shouts of people just out of sight could be heard. Without blinking or removing its gaze from the space beyond the slope, the being silently departed from the young woman's side and returned to her younger companion.

A large hand wrapped around the child's lower leg securely. Without a sound, the creature slowly descended back into the stream, dragged her limp body down the muddy bank and into the dark running waters behind it.

## 9. Chapter 9

### Chapter 9

"Vera? Vera?! Oh my god, James, is she alright!?"

Vera heard Greta's frantic voice pierce through the silent void in her head. Feeling groggy, she managed a grunt and after squeezing her already-closed eyes tightly shut, opened them slowly to find James' face taking up her field of vision, his dampened hair plastered to his face. At his sudden closeness Vera let out a gasp and sat up, nearly head-butting him in the process. Immediately all prior thoughts came back to her in a dizzying rush.

"Vera! Are you okay? What happened?" A worried Greta suddenly came into view next to James by Vera's feet, her frizzy hair somewhat tamed by the rain that Vera now noticed had lightened considerably.

"The-the girl," Vera spoke as if her words held all the answers and quickly looked around them. There were subtle signs of where she had pulled herself and the child up onto the bank, but there was no sign of the little girl anywhere. Even the stream's water had calmed and appeared to have lowered from earlier. How much earlier? It was darker outside now.

"Where's the little girl? What happened to her?" Vera started again, her voice rising with panic as she tried to get up but faltered. "How long have I been out?"

"Whoa whoa, easy there," James warned her and she let him ease her back down with a steady hand on her shoulder.

Vera took a breath to calm her nerves and swallowed thickly, her eyes going back and forth between their faces. "What are you guys doing here? How did you find me?" she asked, her voice sounding a little more composed than before.

"We were driving over to pick you up at the library," Greta answered her. "James finished work a little early, so we thought we'd drive over and get you – that way you wouldn't have to walk out in the

rain."

"But then Greta saw you over by the bridge, and the next thing we knew you were jumping off," James continued, a worried expression crossing his features. "When we saw the flooding in the stream, we followed its path in the car until we saw you washed up here."

"I called the police when we found you," Greta finished. "Are you hurt?"

Vera nodded a few times, though she did so with some hesitancy. "I'm okay. Just a bit tired and shaken up, I think. But there was a girl here – a little girl in a blue raincoat. I saw her fall into the stream from the bridge; that's why I jumped in. I-I pulled her up with me here..." she trailed off and looked to her side, reaching out her left hand to the space where the child had last been.

*What happened to her?*

A feeling of dread began to well up inside Vera and she bit her lip to keep herself in check. At her side the cousins exchanged worried glances.

"Vera, there was no one else here when we found you," Greta spoke calmly and carefully.

"But I – how?" Vera turned her head around once more to look about, as if the child would suddenly emerge before them. Nothing. "But I saw her; she was right here." Worried and confused, she turned back to her friends' concerned faces. "Please, you have to –"

"We believe you, Vera," James interjected, "and we can have the police look for her once they arrive, but right now, we need to get you back up to the road and make sure you're alright." His tone was sympathetic, but the look he gave her told her not to resist.

"Okay," Vera quietly nodded and allowed the cousins to help her to her feet, though they kept her arms slung about their shoulders in case she might lose her footing or feel faint.

Carefully they maneuvered themselves further up the bank, their feet sloshing in the muddy grass until the earth became firmer and turned

to pavement beneath their shoes. The trio stopped once they had taken a few steps to the other side of the street, and James helped Vera sit down with Greta on the curb before jogging off to the right where Greta saw their car parked. Farther from the water, she could now hear police sirens nearing.

A moment later two patrol cars came into view with their lights flashing, a single officer exiting each; one stayed back to talk with James while the other came over when the two young women were pointed out.

The officer who approached the girls was female, looking to be somewhere in her 40s with a short brown ponytail and squat figure. Getting down on one knee once she was in front of the two, she looked between them and gently placed a hand on Vera's shoulder.

"Miss, I'm Officer Burnoe of the Derry Police Department," she introduced herself with a strong voice that matched her presence, a slight southern accent tinting her words. "We received a call from your friends here that you took a bit of a tumble into the water; can you confirm this for me?"

Vera almost let out a humorless laugh at the expression of her 'taking a tumble,' but gave the officer a nod.

"Alright now, do you feel any pain – anywhere? Any discomfort or nausea when you move?" She looked Vera up and down some more, trying to take note of her overall state.

Vera shook her head. "No, I think I'm okay. Maybe a couple bruises, but other than that, I'm fine," she tried to sound convincing, but the slight tremble in her breath suggested otherwise. She did just do something unordinary that had her anxiety reeling, after all.

"Okay, well we're just gonna take you down to the hospital, make sure you're all right; we can talk more once you've been checked out."

At the mention of a hospital, Vera shook her head adamantly. "Please, no, don't take me to the hospital." The thought of unnecessary time spent being tested and medical expenses were at the forefront of her mind. "I'll be fine; nothing a little food and rest can't fix."

As Vera spoke, James and the other officer appeared behind Officer Burnoe. "Ma'am, this young man here says you said you saw someone else in the water?" the officer inquired and Vera quickly turned her attention towards him.

He was younger than the woman and had thick, dark eyebrows that gave him a stern look, but something about him made Vera think of him as someone who seemed somewhat unsure of themselves and their actions.

"Yes, officer. It was a young girl with brown hair– she had a blue coat on. I don't know what happened to her; she was there one minute and when I came to..." her words trailed off there and her eyes grew unfocused as she tried to pull the memories from a dark recess of her mind. The effort did little to help, unfortunately. "At least tell me you'll check, please," she pleaded, the worry back in her voice as she looked between him and his fellow officer. "I don't know where the stream or whatever it is goes, but if you just look –"

"We'll look for her," Officer Burnoe interjected and gave her shoulder a light squeeze in assurance. "But I would still prefer you see a doctor, just to be safe."

"If I start to feel bad or anything begins to hurt in the next few days, I'll be sure to see someone, but right now, I think I just need some rest."

The woman gave her a skeptical look but let out a sigh as she stood back up to her full height. She couldn't force Vera to go since she wasn't in trouble or in any way unstable. "Alright, Dawes," she turned to her companion, "if you wanna go ahead and radio another couple folks out here to help look for the child, I'll escort this young lady home."

Officer Dawes gave a short reply of understanding and began heading back towards his vehicle.

When he was gone, Burnoe turned to Greta and James. "Thanks for calling, you two. For now, the both of you can go on home; we'll send someone by later to see how you're doing and ask a few more questions."

"Thank you," James gave the officer a firm nod.

But Greta turned to look worriedly at Vera, her small hand lightly grasping the side of Vera's wet shirt as though afraid to leave her. "Vera..." the name left her lips with uncertainty.

"It's okay, Greta," she assured the younger girl quietly with a small smile. Pushing herself up slowly in case her body had second thoughts about working properly, Vera managed to stand with little discomfort.

With a satisfied nod, Burnoe glanced between the three young adults. "Whenever you're ready, miss," she informed Vera without rush and began heading back towards her own police cruiser, leaving the three alone for a moment.

"Thanks for looking out for me guys," Vera spoke earnestly though there was now a weariness in her voice. "I really – I don't know what would have happened if you guys hadn't seen me." Thoughts of drowning and pale, washed up bodies came to mind and she shivered involuntarily.

"Don't think about any of that. Just focus on getting better," James instructed her and Greta nodded in agreement.

"Be careful, Vera." She took a step forward and carefully gave the older girl a hug. "Call us if you need anything. Or the police, or the doctors, or whoever. We'll be there."

"Thanks, you guys." Vera gave the cousins another smile to let them know she would be alright and began making her way slow and steady towards Officer Burnoe who was patiently waiting for her to say goodbye to her friends.

Friends. The word held a sort of warmth to it now despite the light, cool rain that was starting up again, and Vera found comfort in repeating it through her mind as the officer held the back door of her cruiser open for Vera to get in.



## 10. Chapter 10

### Chapter 10

It was impossible not to find sitting in the back seat of a police cruiser a little disconcerting, even though Vera knew she wasn't in trouble for anything. The drive back to her aunt and uncle's house seemed slow and felt almost dream-like, but Vera simply attributed this to her recent "swim" and its resulting outcomes.

To her relief, Officer Burnoe had a blanket waiting for her when she got inside and was silent for the duration of the ride, as if to allow Vera more time to settle down. She was also kind enough to go back and let Vera grab her bag where she had left it on the bridge – all dirty and soaking wet; her umbrella – nowhere to be seen – was likely lost to the wind and rain.

When they at last pulled up to the familiar blue house after what seemed like hours, the older woman helped Vera from the car and to the front door, where she fumbled around in her bag for her keys for a moment before locating them, happy that they hadn't been lost. After another moment of fitting the key into the lock, Vera opened the door with a soft click and stepped inside.

Her relatives knew she would be out later with her friends, but the sight of her stepping inside, still wet, and with a police officer at her heels, was a bit of a shock that sent two pairs of wide eyes and concern in her direction.

"Vera? My goodness, what happened to you, child?" Aunt Belinda rose quickly from her chair and came over at once. "Look at you, you're soaking wet," she observed when lifting the blanket around Vera's shoulders a few inches. "And a bit pale too," she added when brushing a hand against Vera's face. "What happened? I thought you were going out with your friends?" She threw a glance past Vera to the officer stationed behind her, as though she didn't think the girl capable of answering the question herself.

When Officer Burnoe opened her mouth to respond, Vera quickly jumped in. "I made a mistake and fell. By a bridge," she answered

vaguely and mumbled the last part incoherently. "But everything's okay. Greta and James were there when it happened and called Officer Burnoe. She was just making sure I got back here alright," she explained hurriedly to try and keep the conversation short.

As much as she wanted to tell her aunt and uncle everything that happened, all she wanted to do at the moment was lie down in her bed. They could talk about it all in detail the following day. The look on her aunt's face told her she recognized Vera's weariness and desire for rest, but that the conversation definitely wasn't finished.

"Thank you, officer," Vera's uncle spoke as he came to stand beside his wife, an arm placed comfortingly on her shoulder. "Was there anything we could help you with right now?"

Officer Burnoe shook her head. "No, sir, you're fine. I'd just like to talk with Miss Vera here a little more if that's okay." She looked from him to Vera for permission.

Vera looked to her relatives, and when neither of them gave an indication of opposition, she nodded at the officer. "I'll tell you what I can."

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Vera talked with Officer Burnoe for only twenty minutes or so in the kitchen, glad that the woman realized she had become quite tired and in need of rest due to the events of the last hour. Most of the time was spent asking Vera about the child she claimed to have gone after, and then reconfirming that she felt alright and didn't require any medical attention. Every now and then the woman would jot down something Vera said on a small notepad, but most of their interaction was simple questioning back and forth between two people.

"Thank you for your time and cooperation," Officer Burnoe thanked Vera when they finished. "I know you probably would have preferred I just drop you off and leave, but I thought it would be easier if we just got the formalities out of the way. I'll document all this when I get back to the station and see if Dawes was able to find anything." She placed her pen and notepad into one of her inner jacket pockets as she stood from her seat at the table. "If it's alright with you and

your family, I'll come back sometime in the next day or two if we have something to share or if we have any more questions we think you might be able to help answer – if not to at least check up and make sure you're still doing okay."

"Sure, yeah, that's fine," Vera agreed and stood to show the officer out, removing the blanket she had given her in the process.

"Make sure you let us know if anything else comes up or you remember any other details," she instructed as Vera returned the blanket to her and opened the door into the night air, "and thanks again for your cooperation. You be careful out there, and be sure to call us for help if you run into any trouble. It's good what you said you did, but I don't want you putting yourself at risk – that should be our job, first and foremost."

Vera nodded, recognizing a reprimand – although somewhat softer in this case – when she heard one. She was actually just glad the officer believed she had seen the child and was acting on it, rather than dismissing it as mere illusion and scolding her for making up lies.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Officer Burnoe; it won't happen again," she replied. "Thank you again for your help this evening, and I'll see you again soon."

With a grunt and small tip of her head in acknowledgement in Vera's direction, the older woman stepped through the doorway and out into the night, fading into a dark silhouette as she made her way back to her patrol cruiser on the street. Vera watched her from the open doorway until the car was out of sight and earshot before slowly closing the door and locking it behind her.

As if on cue, Belinda and Richard appeared from the living room as soon as the lock clicked, both watching her expectantly after having left Vera and Officer Burnoe alone for some privacy. Despite this, it had been blatantly obvious that the couple had been listening in on their conversation from the next room, given how quiet and still the house had been since Vera and Burnoe took up their brief occupancy in the kitchen.

On the one hand, Vera was glad as it saved her the trouble of having

to reiterate the story for what felt like the tenth time in the past couple hours; on the other, she wished they had had more respect for privacy instead of eavesdropping like children. But Vera knew she couldn't hold it against them; she understood their concern that was indeed well-placed given how everything must have looked to them. If either of them had come before her in a similar manner, Vera embarrassingly acknowledged her response would have been the same. It was for the best they knew everything, as the last thing she wanted was for them to formulate some crazy idea around the gaps she might have otherwise left in her retelling. However, she wasn't keen on discussing that topic right then and there. For now, she just wanted to get clean, dry off, and snuggle up in bed. Any further questions and comments could wait until the following day.

"I'm sorry for worrying you both," she finally spoke to her aunt and uncle. "I know you probably have questions, but if it's alright with you, I'd really just like to go lie down now. I promise we can talk about what happened tomorrow if you want to; I don't think I have that much energy left in me at the moment." She hoped her words didn't sound dismissive or rude and made her way towards the stairs in a tired shuffle.

"But-," Aunt Belinda began to speak but stopped when her husband placed a hand on her shoulder. She gave the man a look but he gave her an easy expression and slight nod of his head before moving his gaze back to Vera.

"It's okay, Vera, we understand; it's been an unexpectedly rough day. You go ahead and rest and I'll wrap up some leftovers from dinner for you in the fridge in case you get hungry later." He gave her an encouraging nod, his eyes easy and sympathetic to her situation.

Vera returned his nod with a weary smile, and bidding the couple her thanks and goodnight, made her way upstairs. She thought she heard her aunt begin to quietly protest against her uncle's words, but decided to tune them out as she reaching the landing of the second floor, each step bringing her closer to much-desired rest.

If it had only been rain water that soaked her through she might have even passed on a shower, but the smudges of mud on her arms and hands that was likely browning her clothes convinced her otherwise.

Brushing her teeth and throwing on her pajamas afterwards, Vera nearly collapsed onto her bed, lazily pulling the covers up around her face as she snuggled into her pillows.

Vera let out a light groan once she was comfortably positioned, first out of exhaustion, and then once more when she remembered she had work the next day. Getting up out of bed and having to venture outside suddenly sounded like the most unappealing thing in the world. If she wasn't getting paid and wasn't so new to her job, she likely would have called out sick. As things were, however, she would just have to tough it out this time around.

Hopefully the events of the evening didn't spread about the town and everyone who knew something kept it to themselves. Vera didn't need everyone going crazy and getting into a fuss now that things were beginning to fall into place and giving her a chance to settle down into a comfortable routine of sorts.

But if anything was still weighing heavily on her mind, it was the little girl in the blue coat she had gone after. Squeezing her eyes shut tightly, Vera said a voiceless prayer to the darkness around her that the little girl would be found soon, alive and well, and that the whole thing would be put to rest without any more trouble.

That night, when sleep finally came to her, images of pale-faced children floating lifelessly in an endless sea of black haunted every corner of Vera's dreams.

## 11. Chapter 11

### Chapter 11

When Vera's alarm went off the next morning to signal the start of her day, it took every ounce of her self-control not to pick it up, throw it against the wall, and roll back over in bed. Going to bed without eating the night before was now coming back to bite her, and she could feel her stomach clenching as it begged for food.

Still feeling groggy, she managed to sit herself up in bed, and throwing the covers off her, groaned when she saw her bare legs spotted with several bruises.

"Figures," she mumbled to herself and swung her legs over the bedside, feeling them protest slightly in the process.

Jumping into stormy waters wasn't exactly a norm that her body was prepared for; she would just have to take it slow for the next day or so. Rubbing a hand over her face and giving a sniff, Vera convinced her body to push itself up off the bed and carry her downstairs to the kitchen, feeling like an old person shuffling wearily about the house at a snail's pace.

Her aunt and uncle had already left for work, which saved her from an early-morning conversation about the evening before, but Vera knew the questions would come as soon as she got back later. For now, though, she just enjoyed eating a bowl of cereal and some toast in comfortable silence.

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The rest of the day passed rather slowly from Vera's perspective. The air was humid on her walk to work – no doubt the lingering signs of rain from the day before – and she was left feeling sticky and sweaty by the time she made it to the library.

Mrs. Peterson spoke to her as she would any other day, oblivious to the events of the previous evening, and for this Vera was grateful, satisfied that the older woman wouldn't be watching her all day. As tired as her mind and body felt, she didn't want anyone excessively

worrying over her; she would rather keep such things to herself than risk becoming a liability – if only temporarily.

The fact that Greta wasn't volunteering that day made things easier for Vera as well, as she was able to get her work done without nervous glances or questions. But knowing Greta and understanding her and James' concern the previous evening, she knew they'd be around to check on her before the day was out. At the very least this gave her time to think about last night and formulate her answers, though she was sure the majority of questions would relate to her health and well-being.

With these thoughts in mind, Vera went about her day as usual, not caring that she was a little slower in her work or that the day was uneventful. Nothing seemed to have changed. The only thing that gave her worry was when Mrs. Peterson spoke to her near the end of her shift.

She had approached Vera normally enough, but by the end of the conversation was frowning slightly and narrowed her eyes as she lowered her head downwards below Vera's face.

"Is there something – did something happen to your neck, dear?" she reached out for the collar of Vera's shirt, nearly making her flinch at the sudden closeness, and gave it a small pull downwards.

"What?" Vera asked dumbly and raised a hand up to the woman's when she noticed her frown deepen, not sure what Mrs. Peterson was seeing.

"Did something happen earlier? It looks like you've got a bruise forming around your neck here," the librarian replied, her gaze sweeping over the rest of Vera's neck as though searching for further discoloration.

Vera mimicked her frown and involuntarily roamed her hand over the front of her neck. She hadn't seen or felt anything earlier, but if she applied slight pressure she could now feel a dull pain under the skin.

"That's strange," was all she could think to say. "I don't know how

that could have happened."

Mrs. Peterson gave her an unsure look, but Vera had nothing else she could offer as explanation. She recalled nothing from the previous evening, and she couldn't think of anything that might have left a bruise there like the woman described.

Mrs. Peterson let her hand drop to allow Vera to adjust her collar, self-consciously trying to tug it higher up her neck as though the apparent bruise left her feeling embarrassed.

"I guess I can go have it checked out later to make sure it's nothing serious," she fumbled out, not sure what the librarian might be thinking as the woman mumbled something about young people.

Afterwards she had gone to the bathroom and observed her neck herself, frowning once more when she saw Mrs. Peterson had been correct: along the front of her throat and creeping up the sides of her skin were several patches of apparent bruising. They didn't look too bad right then and there, but given a few more hours, Vera worried she might look as if she had a noose around her neck recently, and that was definitely something she didn't want to lead people to believe.

Biting her lip, she fastened the top button of her shirt and lessened the fold in her collar in an attempt to better hide the darkening skin, desperately wishing she had a summer scarf or something to cover her neck with. She didn't know how she was going to explain *this* to anyone who noticed.

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Aside from this event, the rest of the day went on without surprise.

Just as Vera had expected, Greta and James were waiting for her after she left the library that evening, both eager to ask about her day and her condition. Not much was actually said about the incident from the previous day, and the cousins seemed more concerned with how Vera was feeling since then.

She assumed nothing had been found out – or anyone given any updates – about the little girl she had gone after, and thus felt it



better to leave the topic off to the side for the moment, not wanting to seem ungrateful and brush aside her friends' concerns for her well-being. She reassured them several times and told them she only had a few bruises, but felt it better not to show them the ones forming on her neck, doing her best to keep them from sight as she knew it would likely throw Greta into a fit of greater worry.

After what seemed like an endless cycle of reassurances and apologies for causing trouble and making them worry, Vera managed to steer the conversation away from the subject and towards that of their attendance at the summer fair. Although the fair would go on for several days, Greta was eager for them to go when it first opened late Friday afternoon – after everyone was out of class and Vera off work. Although it would be especially crowded at this time, she swore the fireworks show at the end of the night was not to be missed, and rived only by that on the fair's closing night at the end of its second summer run. It wasn't as though she had to especially twist Vera's arm to going then; the library closed early on Friday to mark the end of the school year and Vera was eager to go out and do something fun.

With a plan coming together, the three decided to meet at five Friday evening around the front of the Paul Bunyan statue in the park. With Vera's OK, Greta and James would bring a couple extra friends along with them from school – so she wouldn't get tired of hanging out with only the two of them, James had jokingly added.

With everyone in agreement, things seemed to relax further, and James offered to give Vera a ride home. Although she might normally decline for not wanting them to go out of their way for her, right now Vera didn't care and wanted to be nothing more than lazy for the rest of the day. That, and she was sure Greta would continue to insist until she agreed.

The ride back to her house was brief but nice, and Vera felt if she hadn't been talking with her friends she probably could have fallen asleep in the short time it took for them to get from the library to the front of her aunt and uncle's house.

With a hug from Greta and the assurance that Vera could call them at any time if she needed something, Vera thanked them for the ride

and exited the passenger seat, making sure to stay cautious so that her collar wouldn't slip to expose her bruises. She gave them each a smile and a small wave as she closed the car door, and made her way up the driveway towards the front door, unlocking it with ease and slipping inside.

Vera closed her eyes and let her head tilt back against the door with a sigh of relief as she pushed it closed with her shoulders. It was good to be home, and her aunt and uncle wouldn't be back from work for another hour or so, which gave her time to lie down and relax alone for a short while before she would likely be bombarded with questions.

Putting away her bag and changing into more comfortable clothes, Vera made her way back downstairs and flopped down on the couch slowly and content. It felt nice to lie down again, and she now had something to look forward to at the end of the week.

## 12. Chapter 12

### Chapter 12

Vera flexed her toes under the kitchen table as she aimlessly pushed her food around her plate with her fork. She was losing her appetite more and more, and the fact that her food was growing colder by the minute did little to remedy this.

Aunt Belinda and Uncle Richard had come home not long ago from work and let her sleep – as she had apparently passed out on the sofa for a short time – until dinner was prepared. She was clearly tired and still felt half-asleep as evidenced by the yawn she let out every now and then, but this hadn't stopped her aunt from bringing up the topic Vera knew she was eager to discuss – no matter how little she felt there was to say about it.

It wasn't like she had witnessed a murder and undergone some incredible challenge to evade the killer in cinematic fashion. As she repeatedly explained this to her relatives, she couldn't help but feel they were relieved and maybe even a bit disappointed at what had transpired.

Next to her aunt, her uncle sat silently as though monitoring the conversation, his arms folded across his chest. As dinner had progressed, Vera realized just how quiet a man he was, especially when his wife had something to say or conflicts arose, and wondered if it was for these reasons more so than his disorganization as her aunt claimed that he hadn't taken over his father's business. He didn't want to fan the flames, but neither did he want to be the one to put them out, so he settled on distancing himself from such situations by allowing himself to recede into the background.

It didn't please Vera, but she couldn't say she had never done the same thing herself.

Therefore, it was her aunt, unsurprisingly, that did most of the talking.

"I realize you wanted to help, but that was still a terribly foolish thing

to do," she chided and Vera fought off the urge to roll her eyes, having already listened to her aunt reiterate these words several times over the course of their meal thus far.

"What if you were seriously injured? How could I tell my sister that I let such a thing happen to her daughter while I was here?" The woman shook her permed head as though she couldn't fathom such a thought.

"But you weren't *there*, Aunt Belinda," Vera defended back. "I couldn't just stand by and watch some child drown. And I told you, I can swim; it's not like I jumped into a tsunami or anything."

"Yes, but such impulsive behavior will get your hurt – or worse. I understand your concern, truly. No one else was around, so you felt you had to do something. But I'd much rather you got help first – preferably from someone better suited to handle such a situation, rather than go off on your own. If something had happened to you, then that would be two people hurt, and we might not even know where to look for you; no one can help if they don't know you need it."

"My friends saw me, though," Vera pointed out, trying to state her argument.

"By mere chance." Shot down. "If they didn't that could have been the end."

Vera didn't like the lack of faith her aunt was now professing to have in her abilities. While she realized and wasn't so irresponsible as to deny that what she had done wasn't entirely safe, a part of her had hoped that her relatives would understand that she only had good intentions; her actions weren't suicidal or those of a reckless child.

What else was she supposed to do? Call the police and hope that they got around to finding the child before it was too late? Vera scoffed mentally at the thought. Fat chance.

"Again, I told you I was able to get the girl ashore, so it was okay. It was just after that-." Vera quickly closed her mouth. She knew she had lost the argument as soon as the last words passed her lips and

instantly regretted saying them. And she knew that everyone at the table knew that, too.

"Just after that that the little girl was gone," Aunt Belinda finished for her in a serious tone that dealt the killing blow.

Vera clenched her jaw in frustration, not only because it was the truth, but because it proved that her actions had all been for naught. For a short time she had successfully saved a life, but it had ultimately been pulled away like the girl must have been pulled away by the water's tides.

The thought left a bad taste in Vera's mouth and a sick feeling in her stomach as it passed through her mind. Without even realizing it she had just admitted, unintentionally but truthfully, that she thought the child was dead. She had failed to save a child. A child was dead. The little girl had been safe with her, but then Vera had passed out, and in the next moment she was gone. A child was *dead*. Because of her?

The thoughts and feelings that washed over Vera in that moment sent a shiver through her body and she had to bite her lower lip to keep herself from letting out a noise of anguish. It was as if her emotions were finally catching up with her from what had happened, and a veil lifted from her eyes that had kept her from seeing and acknowledging the truth.

The little girl had been drowning before Vera had jumped in to save her, and somehow been pulled back into the water after Vera had pulled her out. She had been unconscious, so there was no way she could have survived if she went back under. It would be comparable to dying in one's sleep, only not from natural causes, Vera figured.

Tears were beginning to prickle her eyes and Vera blinked rapidly to keep them from gathering and falling. How could she have been so foolish and naïve, carrying on as if everything was okay? She had gone to work as if it were any other day, completed what was set before her as intended, met up with her friends and laughed, talked amicably about their plans for the near future, and assured them that everything was fine – that *she* was fine. How was it that she could be so horribly selfish? Her situation was nothing in comparison to that of the little girl's.

She was losing her composure.

From across the table, Aunt Belinda let out an audible sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes momentarily before opening them and looking back at Vera. "Just tell me – *promise me*, you won't do something like this again. That you'll call someone else for help first next time."

Vera wanted to reply, but she knew her voice wouldn't have come out if she did. She swallowed thickly and gave a wet sniff, and that's when it seemed her walls decided to crumble.

A look to her aunt's face, a small sound like a whimper, and salty tears were running down Vera's cheeks. As her expression fell apart so did that of her aunt's, and in seconds the older woman was beside her, one hand on Vera's back while the other rested against the back of her neck, pulling her forward and into the crook of her own neck.

"Oh, sweetie," Aunt Belinda cooed, sympathy lacing in her voice as she stroked Vera's hair. "I'm sorry. I know we're all very worried, and it's a lot to take in." She planted a kiss against the side of Vera's head and moved to bring her into a tighter hug. "It's okay. It's okay. We'll figure this out."

Vera could say nothing, and let herself cry silently with the exception of the occasional snuffle and heavy but shaking breath. She didn't know for how long she sat there in her aunt's embrace as the woman offered gentle words into her ear, but she was in no rush to leave the comfort she found within her arms at that time.

On the other side of the table, Vera's uncle sat quietly with his hands folded in his lap, unperturbed by the scene before him.

Their food had gone cold, but no one seemed to care anymore.

## 13. Chapter 13

### Chapter 13

Vera's uncle was cleaning the dishes in the kitchen while she sat watching TV in the living room with her aunt. After she had stopped crying, exhaustion had settled in once again, making her feel heavy and lethargic.

She hadn't meant to make such a scene at dinner, but Aunt Belinda reassured her it was to be expected after what she went through. If she wasn't feeling so down, Vera might have laughed, as the woman had seemingly done a one-eighty and switched from strict and authoritative to comforting and sympathetic, leading Vera to wonder what would have happened if she had just gone into the conversation crying.

She did feel a little better now, though, having let some of her emotions out. With her head resting against a couple of the sofa's pillows, she could just feel her eyes beginning to droop when the doorbell rang followed by three curt knocks on the door.

Frowning at what someone could want so late in the evening, Vera sent her aunt a look to which the older woman replied with a shrug of her shoulders and removed herself from her rocking chair, pacing out of the room and in the direction of the front door.

Vera heard the door unlock after a moment and strained to hear over the sounds of the TV without turning the volume down. She wasn't lazy; she just didn't want to seem too nosy if anyone should come in without her hearing them. She caught a few words from her aunt and heard a couple other voices – one of them she recognized as Officer Burnoe but the other she was unfamiliar with – but couldn't discern what any of them were talking about.

A minute passed and then Aunt Belinda emerged at the edge of the room. She cleared her throat and then seemed to pause, as if unsure of what to say next while Vera waited, looking at her expectantly.

"Vera, Officer Burnoe is here – from the other night," she added as if

Vera wouldn't remember. "There's someone here with her, too. They just want to check up, ask a couple more things. Do you think you could speak to them for a moment? I can send them away if you're not up to it."

Vera bit her lower lip but nodded, and her aunt ushered her to come to the door. She was tired, and a part of her wanted to tell her aunt to send everyone away, just so she could have quiet the rest of her evening. But deep down Vera knew such a thing was impossible. If the police had wanted to merely check up on her, they would have visited earlier in the day.

Which meant they had found something.

It was the only logical explanation, Vera told herself. From within her chest her heart began beating faster as she got up off the sofa and made her way to the front door, where Officer Burnoe stood quietly awaiting her with another woman.

Unlike Burnoe, the young woman beside her was thin and wore no uniform, dressed in a dark green collared blouse with a brown skirt that reached the tops of her knees. Her straight brown hair came to rest just below her shoulders and she held a burgundy purse tightly with both hands at her front. She was no officer – that much was obvious – but when Vera looked at her face she saw in her features the same expression she had seen in Thomas' mother the previous week.

*This is the little girl's mother.*

Vera didn't even need to ask for confirmation. The thought went through her mind as fast as the chill that ran down her spine. She hadn't expected this. What could she even say to the woman? The word 'sorry' sounded like nothing but an excuse, half-hearted and awkward.

"Um, Officer Burnoe, it's good to see you again," she nearly stumbled over her first words and already found herself subconsciously beginning to wring her hands together nervously.

"Miss Vera, you seem to be doing alright; you look better than you



did the other day," the officer returned, seemingly oblivious to Vera's display of anxiety. "Thank you for agreeing to talk with us for a couple minutes; I know it's rather late to be visiting. This is Mrs. Connors," she gestured to the young woman beside her who greeted Vera with wide eyes and an uneven voice that matched her current temperament.

Vera managed to sound out a meek 'hello' in return and waited as Officer Burnoe went on.

"I apologize again for coming here so late, but we'll try not to take up too much of your time. Just a few questions to ask is all." When Vera gave her no indication of protest, she looked Mrs. Connors in the eye and gave her a supportive nod.

In silent understanding, the brunette turned her attention to her purse and began digging around for something within it as the officer continued to speak.

"I know the incident the other evening was... difficult, and you've probably had a great deal running through your head. I know you've probably got questions or at least want to know how things are going, which is one of the reasons we're here tonight. What officers we called to the scene couldn't find anything, neither in the immediate area nor farther downstream. After I dropped you off, we had some officers down at the station begin to go through some records of children who might have matched your description." She paused and gave a quick look to the brunette beside her. "Mrs. Connors came to us not long after that; she said her daughter was out playing earlier and hadn't come home –"

"We asked the neighbors and called some friends to ask if anyone had seen her," Mrs. Connors suddenly spoke up as if to ensure her side of the story was heard. "It was later in the day and my husband was working inside at the time while I was making dinner. We can't always keep an eye on her, but knows not to go out of sight of the house. She's a smart little girl, and knows to come inside when the weather gets bad like it did." Mrs. Connors spoke with a wavering voice, the words leaving her mouth in a rush as though she was trying to explain her thoughts out loud as she reasoned with them, not only for Vera's benefit, but for her own as well. "I thought she

had come back in earlier, but perhaps it was only the storm outside that I heard. When I called her for dinner, she was nowhere to be found. I went to the police when neither we nor the neighbors found anything, and they told me what had happened with you earlier. It wasn't far from our house or neighborhood."

At last she seemed to find what she was looking for in her purse and with slightly trembling fingers held out several prints. "This – this is Jane."

Vera swallowed dryly, her ears nearly ringing with the sound of her own heart pumping as she outstretched her hand to take the photos.

"Is this the little girl that you saw?" The question nearly came out as a whisper from Mrs. Connor's lips.

Carefully Vera examined each of the prints, the backs of her eyes prickling as the face of the little girl from the previous evening smiled up at her, her skin a healthy rosy color and her brown hair tamed in the sunshine.

Vera felt her throat closing up the longer she looked at the pictures. Little Jane was the girl she had seen, but admitting it felt like the hardest thing in the world at that moment. Her thoughts flashed back to earlier in the evening when she had expressed her beliefs by indirectly stating that the child was dead. Not only did the present situation and words spoken now seem to rub salt on the still-raw wound, but they did everything but deny it as fact now.

Vera wanted to run away, hide, tell Mrs. Connors that she had never seen the child in the photographs; say that it was someone else – anything other than the truth that would most certainly destroy what ounce of hope the woman still held on to.

But she couldn't do that. Such a thing would be even crueler than admitting the honest truth – no matter how terrible.

Vera looked up to meet Mrs. Connors eyes before briefly flickering to the officer's and then back again. With hurt in her expression, she watched the woman's face crumble before her as she spoke. "I'm so sorry Mrs. Connors."

Tears poured down the young mother's face as her mouth opened to produce a cry. "Oh God, my little girl..." she broke down in a sob as Officer Burnoe quickly came to her aid with a supportive arm around her shoulder.

Vera felt the tears pooling in her own eyes as she perceived the painful display before her, torn between what she should do. She wanted to move Mrs. Connors side and embrace her, give her all the comfort she could to combat her grief, but at the same time, she felt it best she keep her distance, not being a good source of comfort as the bearer of the bad news. It would be like slapping someone without reason and then immediately acting friendly like the assault had never happened; the victim would find such behavior unacceptable and absurd.

Nevertheless, sniffing as she willed her tears to keep from falling, Vera threw aside her hesitation and came closer to place a hand lightly against Mrs. Connors shoulder in a gesture of sympathy, holding out the pictures of Jane with the other which the weeping woman took and clutched to her chest like a lifeline.

"I'm so sorry. For you and your husband...for everything," Vera spoke again, unable to think of anything else she *could* say, her words sounding more strained this time from withheld emotions.

Her words were met with the red, tear-stained face of Mrs. Connors. "My Jane is gone, and no one knows where. *Why? Why* do you not know?" The photos dropped to the floor with her purse as her hands suddenly shot up to grab desperately at Vera's shirt, some of the sadness in her voice replaced by anger as her brow furrowed. "You were with her, so how do you not know where she is?"

Vera's eyes widened at the unexpected action, and she reached up to take hold of the woman's wrists in an effort to get her to loosen her grip.

"Grace." Officer Burnoe uttered her name in a firm tone that suggested the woman maintain some sort of self-control over her actions.

"How can *you* be here, but not *her*?!" Mrs. Connors tugged firmly on

Vera's shirt as she stood mute in place, as though dumb-struck by the woman's words. They were horrible in their accusations, but were they what she deserved? She wasn't sure.

The thoughts in her mind had been screaming at her for the past hour that everything was her fault in some way, that there had been something more she could have done, but there had still been a small voice among them that insisted she carried no blame because she had done everything she could to her utmost ability. Her head felt like a jumbled mess of guilt, grief, and anxiety. Did she still carry some responsibility for what happened? Is that how everyone else perceived things? And whether she did or did not, what now?

By this point she should have known better, Vera chided herself mentally. Things were always more complex than one desired and initially perceived. Whenever she thought she had something sorted, it would grow roots and branch out like a tree, firmly planting itself into her life and creating more aspects to figure out, more problems to drop down on her like inadequate fruit. This whole ordeal was certainly proving to be no exception, and Vera felt her anxieties piling up by the second – even without a specific thought or worry to fixate on. *Life's a bitch*, her head mocked.

"What did you with her? Tell me!" Mrs. Connors voice snapped Vera out of her thoughts, and she found the grieving mother's wide eyes looking somewhere below her eye line.

Glancing down, Vera saw the woman's actions had loosened her shirt collar to expose some of her skin, and she suddenly remembered the bruising on her neck Mrs. Peterson had pointed out earlier. As if on reflex, her hand shot up as though to hide the marks from Mrs. Connors' prying eyes. It was bad enough she was already being blamed by her for not saving Jane; Vera didn't need some thinly-veiled insinuation on top of that that she was the reason behind the child's disappearance as well.

"I don't know how I got them. It was at some point during the other night," she tried to placate the woman's steadily growing frantic demeanor, and shot Officer Burnoe a look that said she required assistance.

Rising to the occasion, Burnoe reached out to pull at Mrs. Connors' fingers, managing to loosen them. "Grace, please," she spoke again, pleading as she finally wrested the mother's hands from Vera's person, "you're in shock. I need you to let go of her. Take some deep breaths for me."

"But she was with my daughter," Mrs. Connors' voice grew weary with anguish. "You told me she had said she had Jane with her. Look at her neck – why would she have bruises there if she was saving my daughter? How do I know she didn't do something to her?!"

The poor woman now seemed to be bordering on hysteria, but Vera didn't miss the way Officer Burnoe briefly scanned the area of her neck as though there was now a slight inkling of doubt cast towards her. How could they think such a thing?

"Alright, Grace, alright," Officer Burnoe spoke again. "We'll get through this. *You'll* get through this," she added with emphasis. The arm that she had previously wrapped around the young woman now rubbed her back comfortingly, as Mrs. Connors now stood with arms crossed over her chest to clutch at her shoulders as though cold.

Still keeping an eye on the woman in case she decided to lash out again, Vera cautiously reached down and collected the photos scattered on the floor, quietly placing them within the dropped purse and handing them to the officer with a slight nod. "I'm so sorry," she repeated the words again quietly, shaking ever so slightly, feeling like a broken record that could say nothing else.

But Officer Burnoe simply shook her head. "I'm the one who should be apologizing." She threw a glance to the woman beside her who had resumed her crying. "I wasn't quite expecting... Please forgive her, she didn't mean all that. I'm sure you can imagine this is all very difficult for her."

"No; it's fine, it's fine. I understand her feelings," Vera said sadly, though she couldn't bring herself to look at Mrs. Connors. She wasn't sure if she spoke the words more for her own reassurance or Burnoe's.

## 14. Chapter 14

### Chapter 14

Vera felt coldness from within creeping under her skin even as she snuggled deep under her blankets in bed. After Officer Burnoe and Vera had apologized to one another, and it became apparent neither were going to get any other sort of response from Mrs. Connors, the two older women departed to leave Vera to her aunt and uncle.

Vera's relatives had – unbeknownst to her until afterwards – been waiting just outside the room the moment the Mrs. Connors had raised her voice, and Aunt Belinda was adamant about getting some ice for Vera's bruising. They had proceeded to fuss over her and make sure she was okay, but Vera's mind had primarily been occupied with thoughts of the young mother; the way she had looked at Vera and the words she had spoken to her, the expression on her face when she knew what happened... This, and the thoughts and fears that were now amassing uncontrollably in Vera's brain like a tumor.

What now? The deceased had an identity, which made things all the more tragic for those involved. What would happen to the family? What if they couldn't recover and something worse happened? Would everyone in Derry know what happened and that Vera was involved by the end of the week? What if more people thought she had done something bad? Would she be an outcast and have to move elsewhere to avoid being judged and ostracized? What would people say; about her and her relatives? And was Officer Burnoe suspicious of her now that she had seen the bruising on her neck? Vera still had no idea what had caused it, but she worried what the police might think after the accusation Mrs. Connors had thrown at her – no matter how untrue and illogical. Absentmindedly she reached up and rubbed the area of her neck. There was a slight tinge of discomfort now and then, but nothing drastic. She would probably stick to collared shirts for a few days to be safe.

Vera felt as though she were swimming in a sea of anxieties, the sheer weight of them keeping her from breaching the surface to relieve the aching in her chest. The feeling remained until at last Vera felt she could take no more and flung herself out of bed,

throwing on a light jacket and some slippers before making her way quickly but quietly down the stairs. She made her way to the front door, not even bothering to turn on any lights on her way as she snatched the extra key that was waiting on the small table next to the door. For a few seconds she fumbled with it in the lock in the darkness until at last it granted her access to the outside where she could fully experience her anxiety attack without feeling trapped inside the walls of the house.

Dropping herself down onto the front steps, Vera bent over and clutched her head while squeezing her eyes shut, feeling her heart pound in her chest for several minutes as she struggled to regain some sort of composure. She could feel tears lightly prick the corners of her eyes as all sense of the world around her disappeared, causing her body to home in on itself and what it was feeling. The night outside was silent except for the light choir of insects, but inside her head Vera could hear only an endless cacophony of her own thoughts. She could neither banish nor redirect them, and her body responded in like by remaining frozen, as though she were cemented in place. It was shocking she didn't collapse into an emotional, blubbering mess given the circumstances.

As she sat there on the steps illuminated only by the porch light overhead, the feelings of suffocation and panic eventually began to gradually subside. Despite this, Vera remained hunched over tightly for some time afterwards, indifferent to what time it may be or how long she might have been stooping there. Instead, she merely listened until she could perceive the night around her and feel the slight coolness in the air through her jacket.

It wasn't until Vera began to feel the strain in her body from how tense her muscles were that she finally moved from her curled position. She took a few deep breaths and let them out long and slow, ridding herself of the last waves of the attack. Her anxiety wasn't totally diminished – not that she ever expected it to be, but it wasn't as overpowering as it was before, and was now being diluted by an overpowering sense of exhaustion. Weariness was setting in fast, and it took all of Vera's will to force herself up off the steps and back into the house, to lock the door, and make her way up the stairs and into bed.

She didn't sleep heavily, or much, but at least there was some reprieve from the recent concerns of waking life.

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As expected, waking up didn't come easy when Vera's alarm went off the next morning. She was tired again, but now the weariness seemed more mental and emotional than physical, making it seem as though all her feelings had been numbed. It wasn't a great feeling, and her body still carried a sort of exhaustion within it. For a few minutes, Vera contemplated calling out of work, wanting nothing more than to just roll over and bary herself alive under her blankets, yet her still-anxious mind quickly convinced her otherwise.

Calling out on such short notice might invite unwanted questions from Mrs. Peterson, and Vera was determined to avoid such things; she didn't need the knowledge of her current personal issues spreading to others outside her family and friends. For an instant panic seized her at the thought that her aunt and uncle might talk with their friends and acquaintances about her and what happened, but she hastily reassured herself that they would never do such a thing, not when they knew if affected her so.

Vera knocked her head back against her pillow once and let out breath. She had to get up now.

Like a machine she went about her morning routine: eat breakfast, brush teeth, shower, get dressed, pack lunch; everything completed as per usual and without interruption. As she finished locking the front door behind her, Vera let out an audible sigh. Last night was still on her mind, and she would have to tell Greta and James about it. To not do so would likely weigh on her mind, as would the desire to talk with someone about it without them obsessing over her, like her family would.

*Assuming Mrs. Connors hasn't gone out herself and spread word*, Vera's mind suddenly mused negatively, making her frown. The woman did seem – Vera didn't like the word, but – *unstable*, as time had gone on last night. Certainly the shock and grief of losing her daughter was incomparable to anything Vera could imagine, and as much as she worried about what might have happened to Jane, a part of her definitely felt for her mother too – and the father, though Vera hadn't



met him. Perhaps he had been waiting at the police station in case someone found something?

Trying to clear away the unpleasant thoughts that clouded her mind like smoke from a fire, Vera forced herself to think about what menial tasks Mrs. Peterson might have her perform at work for the day as she began her walk to the library. Sure, it wasn't something exciting to think about, but at least it was something relatively simple to imagine, and that was what Vera desperately needed at this moment: something simple. No what-if thoughts and anxieties, just a routine, uneventful day on the job.

It seemed fortune was on her side regarding this matter, as the day went by rather quietly for Vera. Much of her time was spent re-shelving books and handling returns as Mrs. Peterson had foretold a week earlier; many students were in the midst of completing their final exams in school – and some still at the university, so there were more books coming back to the library as essays were written and studies were finished. The work was tedious, but at least it kept Vera occupied throughout the day.

Sometime after her lunch, Mrs. Peterson had introduced her to Mrs. Brooks – or "Rosa" as she preferred to be called, another elderly lady with short white hair and round spectacles who apparently worked on-and-off during the year as a volunteer. In comparison to the head librarian, Rosa seemed much more laid back, and her dainty movements and easy-going expression led Vera to call up thoughts of the stereotypical image of a sweet old lady who might bake cookies and spoil one rotten if given the chance. Vera quickly decided she liked the older woman.

The two had conversed for a bit while working in the same space, and Vera couldn't deny she felt as though she were talking with her grandmother as talk flowed comfortably between them, mostly circulating on the topic of what it was like down in Georgia where Vera was from and Rosa's variety of job experiences. As it turned out, the woman had done nearly everything, from teaching to accounting to landscaping, and was now helping at the library to further her own knowledge and experiences – if not because she was admittedly slowing down and unable to perform as she used to.

In her own way, she gave Vera some semblance of hope, that working in multiple and differing trades was okay, and no one was required to settle down immediately – if at all – within only a single area of work in life.

Although Vera knew they talked about a good number of subjects, she was surprised to find that over two hours had gone by when Rosa was finally needed elsewhere. While a part of her was disappointed by this, she reasoned that it was for the best, as they had likely been less productive as a result, and she didn't want either of them to receive a word of disapproval by Mrs. Peterson. As such, they had left things as they were and went about the rest of their day separately, but not without saying their goodbyes as the library closed up that evening.

Like the previous day, her friends came to meet her after she got off, James heading over from work and Greta from babysitting for a neighbor down the street – an "income-awarding job" she might be doing more of during the summer months she had elaborated, as opposed to only unpaid help at the library.

"So have you heard anything else from the police?" Greta finally broached the subject a while after the group had gotten comfortable on a park bench overlooking an expanse of grass and trees. "Officer Burnoe came to check on us earlier the other day, but she didn't have much to tell us. She was going to visit you later, I think," she elaborated.

*God, please give me strength,* Vera bit her bottom lip as she felt her heart begin to pound like a drum. She had known she would have to be the one to convey the news to the cousins, and indeed the knowledge of that had been on her mind all day, but she had still pushed it to the back of her head, as though doing so could make the world forget it ever happened.

But Vera didn't want to forget. As horrible as it was, to forget would somehow be an insult to Jane, as if saying she wasn't important, or not worth remembering. No. Greta and James needed to know. Vera took a steadying breath to calm her nerves as though she were preparing to recite a speech to a large audience.

"Officer Burnoe came by last night with Mrs. Connors. They showed me a picture of her daughter, who was reported as missing. They must have put two and two together after taking down my description of the little girl and when Mrs. Connors came in saying she couldn't find her daughter." Vera gave brief pause as she wrung her hands together nervously, unable to look at her friends' faces in case doing so distracted her from her recount. "Her name – the little girl's name was Jane, and she was the one I tried to save the other evening. Officer Burnoe told me they hadn't found her, nor was there any sign of her anywhere. No one knows what happened. She's just... gone."